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February 24, 1885.

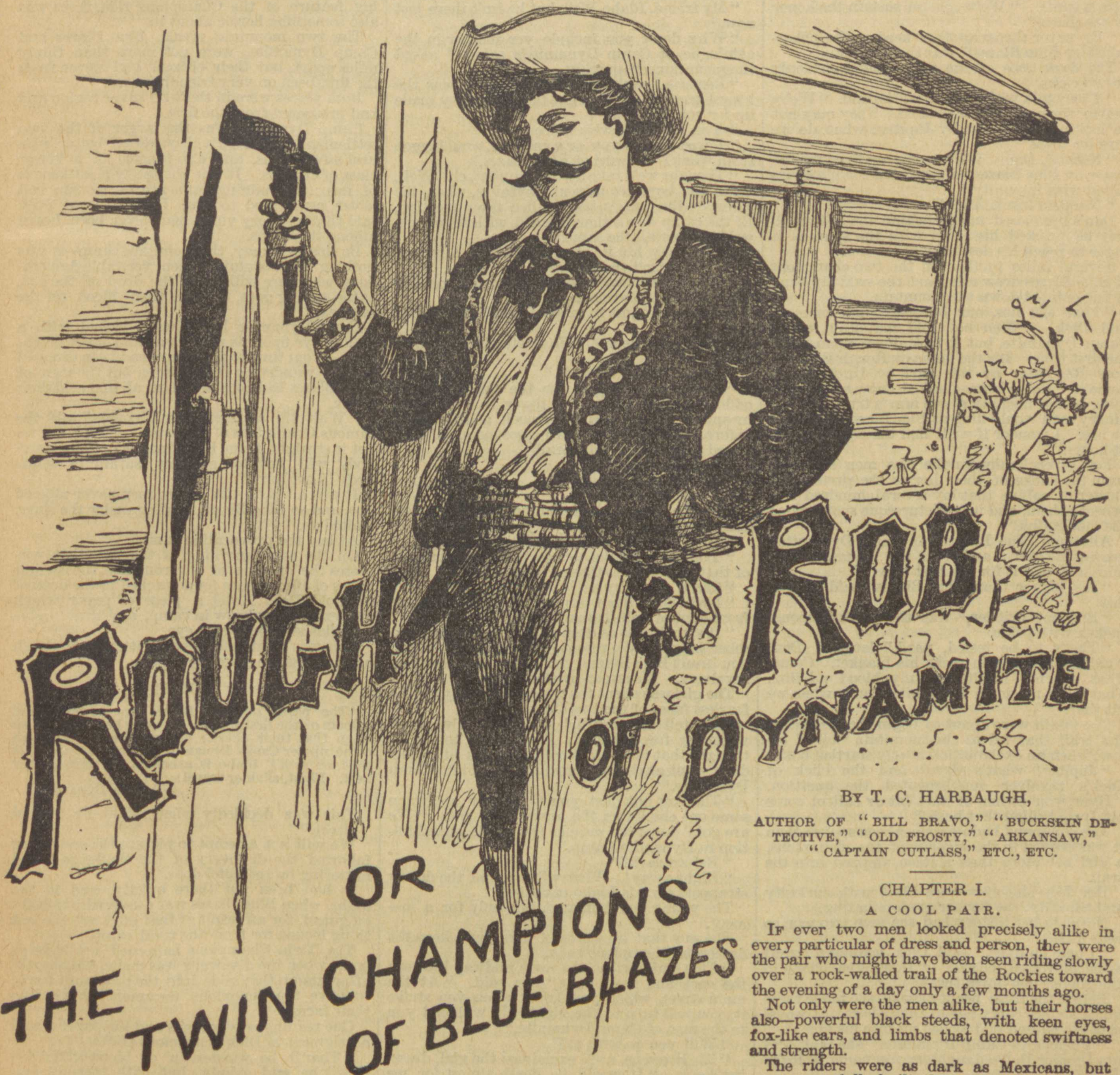
Vol. XVI.

Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 396.



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CHAPTER I.

A COOL PAIR.

If ever two men looked precisely alike in every particular of dress and person, they were the pair who might have been seen riding slowly over a rock-walled trail of the Rockies toward the evening of a day only a few months ago.

Not only were the men alike, but their horses also—powerful black steeds, with keen eyes, fox-like ears, and limbs that denoted swiftness and strength.

The riders were as dark as Mexicans, but more powerfully built than the average representatives of that race.

To describe one would be to describe the other.

A MOMENT AFTER HE HAD CROSSED THE THRESHOLD AND CLOSED THE DOOR, HE HEARD
A LOUD RAP AS IF FROM THE BUTT OF A REVOLVER.

so let us say that, physically, they were perfect specimens of manhood, blessed with broad shoulders, ample chests, and the limbs of athletes; black-eyed, like the Indian, mustached like the bandit, and with masses of shining black hair that hid the lace-fringed collars of their jackets.

These jackets had evidently been made for a market nearer Santa Fe than the Salmon river country of Idaho; they were dark-green in color, with silver braid at the ends of the sleeves, and down the front.

They terminated where the dark-brown pantaloons of the two riders began, and at the union of the two garments was a parti-colored but well-worn sash-belt, in which were stuck the Westerner's trusted companions, the bowie and revolver.

Close-fitting boots that almost touched the knees, and gray sombreros, with wide, flexible brims, completed an attire which would have commanded attention anywhere.

If these two men were not brothers, nature in one had duplicated the other, and fate or fortune had brought them together.

The sun was yet two hours high and there was plenty of light in the mountain trail.

"Thar's thirty miles 'twixt us an' the city," said one of the giants, glancing at the other with a smile. "We've got ter sustain the honor ov the place."

"Er never throw another kerd on the poker-tables ov Blue Blazes!" was the answer.

The dark orbs of the first speaker suddenly grew bright.

"Thet's talk without gloves!" he said. "We're nearin' the new fightin'-ground. They may not be lookin' for us, but by Jupiter! what do we care fer thet?"

"Nothin', Dan. We've come up hyer for the honor ov Blue Blazes—a city what sha'n't be insulted with impunity."

"Nary an insult, Dick!"

Dan's lips closed madly behind the last word, and he pricked his steed with the spur as if eager to reach his destination.

Several miles further on the two champions of Blue Blazes drew rein, and the swarthy hand of one pointed down the mountain.

"Thar she lies, our battle-ground, mebbe," said Dick. "Men hev told me often about Camp Dynamite, but I look down upon it for the first time. It's the home ov Rough Rob, the boss Regulator ov this part ov Uncle Sam's domain. He's a brass-cheeked daisy an' no mistake, ef half men say about him's true. No ordinary man would fling at Blue Blazes the insult he has. I wonder if we'll find the big hangman at home?"

For several minutes the two men surveyed from the backs of their horses the pretentious cluster of cabins that lay several hundred feet beneath them, and in a picturesque spot among the mountains.

Although Blue Blazes was Camp Dynamite's nearest neighbor and rival, the mountain Dromios now saw it for the first time.

"It's bigger than Blue Blazes," said Dan at last.

"But not grittier," was the quick response spoken with pride.

"Thet's to be tested, pard," laughed Dan, "an' before the sun seeks his blanket. Come! That infernal insult sets my blood a-b'ilin'. Thar'll be music in Dynamite Camp when we git thar."

The twain were about to begin the descent of the trail that led to the mountain "city" below, when an exclamation nearly startled both.

"Jupiter! what's that?" and the click of Dick's revolver supplemented the question. "Hyer, you owner of thet bit ov calico; come out from behind that bush!"

The command had no sooner been spoken than it was obeyed to the surprise of the champions, a girl not more than sixteen, stepped into the trail.

Her deep-blue eyes were filled with curiosity and timidity, the former predominating.

Never in her history had she seen two men so near alike.

"Come up hyer," said Dick, leaning forward as he addressed the girl. "Don't you b'long to the gopher den down thar?"

Before the little beauty spoke, she made three quick strides carry her to Dick's horse, at whose side she paused and looked up into his face.

"I belong to Camp Dynamite," she said. "I am Danger Doll's daughter; my name is Ruby Rose."

The men glanced at one another and smiled as if the names were burlesques on mankind.

"Ain't you a good ways from home?" asked Dick.

"Perhaps; but I'm safe here, safer than you are."

"Ho! what's thet, daisy?"

The girl did not move.

"Don't you men belong to Blue Blazes?" she asked.

"Bet yer blue eyes, Ruby; we're the boss cy-clones ov the Rockies," and Dick winked slyly at his companion as he threw him a lightning glance. "We kin chaw more men up in a given space ov time than the champion grizzlies ov this delightful region. So they're lookin' for us, eh?"

"If you are really from Blue Blazes, yes," was the answer.

"Rough Rob, eh?"

"All of Dynamite; he no more than the rest."

"The more, the bigger the pistol-picnic," smiled the big rough cooly. "What's the extent ov the lay-out down thar?"

"Fifty men—men-tigers all of them."

"Are all like Rough Rob?"

"Some are worse."

"Ain't thar a single redeemin' feature in the population besides yerself, Ruby?"

The keen eyes of the mountain sports saw a flush suffuse the girl's temples.

"There is one," she said.

"Yer mother?"

"My friend, Idaho Will, but he isn't there just now."

"Why don't you include yer mother in the catalogue of Camp Dynamite's saints?" asked the mountaineer, quickly.

"Because I can't and tell the truth," was the honest answer. "You got the letter they made up for you, did you?"

"Yes, an' thet's why we're hyer!"

"I was afraid you or somebody would come from what I've heard of Blue Blazes."

"Thought we'd take up the gauntlet, eh? Well, we're the boys ter take up anything, when the honor ov the camp's been called inter question. Ef the camp down thar bristled with revolvers, we'd be hyer all the same."

"You may hit it at a good time after all. Rough Rob isn't there now—"

"Thet's bad!" exclaimed both men at once in tones of disappointment.

"Unless he came in since I left," finished the girl.

"We'll hope he has. He wrote the challenge, didn't he?"

"Coined it and wrote it."

"Every word stung like the tongue ov an adder," grated Dick. "I never saw so much meanness compressed inter such a little space before. It war b'iled-down cussedness, an' they tossed it inter the right den!"

"Are you alone?"

"Bet yer eyes."

"Two against fifty?"

"Ef thar war a thousand men down yonder, thar'd be but two ov us hyer just the same."

Ruby Rose put her hand on Dick's leg.

"You can't get the satisfaction you want out of that nest of men-tigers," she said.

"Can't, eh? Try us!"

"I will not. That insult, that challenge came from a lot of half-drunken men."

"It struck just as deep as if it had come from sober judges. We resent it all the same. When you insult Blue Blazes you draw and cock our revolvers. We swear by thet town."

The girl was silent for a moment, studying the fearless faces of the two Champions.

"To tell the truth," she said, "I've been watching for somebody from your town. I thought that message would stir you up, and I don't want anybody to go blindfolded into Camp Dynamite."

"Thanks; but just you stay hyer an' warn some one else," was the answer she got. "We are goin' down ter sample the goods on exhibition in Dynamite Camp."

"Before dark?"

"Right away! Whar will we find the dandy strappers ov this Idaho paradise?"

The young girl hesitated, but only for a moment.

She saw that no words of hers could keep the desperate Champions back.

"This trail strikes the town midway between the east and west ends," she said. "At the main street, which you know when you strike it, you will turn to the right. It will lead you to the men of Camp Dynamite."

"Will you go with us?"

"I? Heavens, no!" exclaimed the girl, drawing back. "It would be death almost for me to be found where I am!"

"You will wait for the outcome hyer, eh?"

"Yes."

"Mebbe the galoots won't fight?"

"Don't feast yourselves on that notion. There isn't a coward in camp."

"Then we'll try 'em. Come, Dan, forewarned is forearmed, they say; we armed ourselves for the skunks ov Dynamite the minute we read thet meanest of letters. I've got it hyer, Ruby," and the speaker patted his jacket pocket as he finished.

A moment later Ruby Rose of Camp Dynamite was the sole occupant of the spot, for the Champions of Blue Blazes were riding down the trail and had nearly disappeared.

"They did come, the men I thought fortune would keep back," she said to herself. "My mother's description of them doesn't do them justice. They are mountain Apollos, and too big and handsome to become food for the deadly pistols of Rough Rob and his pards. I did all I could to keep them back. I even tried to steal the insulting letter before it was sent off, but failed. I gave them fair warning, but they would go on. Two against fifty. The cat attacks the tiger!"

CHAPTER II.

A PROPHET IN DYNAMITE.

WHILE foolhardiness seemed to be the crowning feature of the Champions' ride, there was also something heroic about it.

The two mountain rivals, Blue Blazes and Camp Dynamite, were not more than thirty miles apart, but their citizens had never from the first been on very friendly terms.

Both places were in the wild silver region and had prospered from the first.

Camp Dynamite was the larger of the two settlements, but its rival possessed better natural advantages, and also boasted of a better class of citizens. It was distinctly a settlement of men; the refining influence of woman had never penetrated to Blue Blazes; it was even said that a silvery voice had never been heard among its cabins.

Be this as it may, the mountain camp—it was nothing less—contained men, veritable desperadoes, who were willing, at the drop of the hat, as the saying goes, to shed their blood for the fair sex.

Camp Dynamite had always looked with a jealous eye upon its near rival and quiet neighbor. From time to time slurs had been directed at it by wandering Dynamiters, but the men of Blue Blazes had pocketed them all and held their peace.

"Wait till a direct insult comes," said the famous Champions of the camp. "Wait till we get it straight from head-quarters; then, somebody will hev ter swallow suthin' or somebody 'll get hurt."

It was a boast, but cooler men never uttered one, and so Blue Blazes, chafing under the slurs, waited on.

At last the provocation came.

On the same morning of the day that witnessed the opening of our romance, the earliest risers of Blue Blazes found tacked to the door of the Cold Deck Hotel a piece of paper which darkened every brow in camp, and drew lightning flashes from every eye.

This was what had been written in a rough hand across the discolored sheet:

"NOTICE!"

"The pards ov Blue Blazes are cowards and galoots ov the first water! They've been slapped so often that their cheeks hev no feelin'. Let 'em come up ter Camp Dynamite an' look for the first time on men! Idaho is ashamed ov their gopher nest. Fight, slink or travel!"

"CAMP DYNAMITE."

This was decidedly what might be termed "direct."

We will not attempt to picture the scene that followed the discovery of the challenge found fluttering on the hotel door.

It had been put there quietly, and in the night, when Blue Blazes was asleep with nobody on guard, for an insult of that kind was the last thing looked for from the rival camp.

The Twin Champions happened not to be at home when the discovery was made, but shortly after sun-up they rode into the mountain town, to have the obnoxious document thrust into their faces.

One reading was enough, and the paper found a lodgment in Dick's capacious pocket.

"Thar'll be word-eatin' or blood-lettin' for this!" he said calmly, but with terrible emphasis. "The dogs ov Dynamite forget that Blue Blazes has two pards who hev sworn ter sustain her honor."

Of course the whole camp swore at once to

carry the war into the very core of the enemy's country, but the two Champions objected.

They would go alone; they would show Rough Rob and his pards that the little camp among the Rockies could not be insulted with impunity; if they failed, or died with their boots on, then, and not until then, Blue Blazes could take up the quarrel.

The Champions had never entered Camp Dynamite, but they knew its location, and something about its prominent citizens.

They knew that it contained fifty men who had acquired a terrible name for desperateness throughout the wild West, that the camp was presided over by a character known as Rough Rob, the Regulator, a man who had helped to cleanse the gold camps of California of their thieving vagabonds, and who had turned out the prince of villains himself.

Strange as it may seem, the Champions had never heard of Ruby Rose, the girl they encountered among the mountains above Camp Dynamite, nor of the woman whom she called Danger Doll, and her mother.

The deeds of Rough Rob and his comrades had completely overshadowed the existence of mother and daughter.

They had noticed the wonderful child-like beauty of the girl who had warned them, and wondered if she had inherited it from the parent who dwelt among the men-tigers of that mountain den.

"I can't get that girl out of my head," declared Dick as the twain rode down the mountain after leaving Ruby Rose. "Wasn't it said that Agnes, our sister, had a baby when she died?"

"It was, by Jove!" asserted Dan, with a start; "but that girl's mother lives in Camp Dynamite. Danger Doll, Ruby calls her, an' I'll stake my hat that she's a daisy."

"An' Rough Rob's pard no doubt," was the answer. "If Agnes an' her kid was livin' mebbe we wouldn't be on this expedition, Dan."

"That's a fact! We'd hev stayed with Agnes, but hyer we ar' without an aim in life more than ter sustain the honor ov the camp we founded among the silver hills."

There was no reply and the brothers kept on, the only noise heard being that made by their horses' hoofs as now and then they struck the stones that cropped out here and there along the trail.

At last they drew rein within a stone's throw of the cabins that comprised Camp Dynamite; the last shadows of the autumn twilight were lingering on the spot, and they could still distinguish the objects by which they were surrounded.

The mountain brothers sat like statues in their saddles at the very edge of the town, wherein they had quietly sworn to avenge the insult offered to Blue Blazes.

"Listen! what's up?" suddenly spoke Dick in whispers as he leaned forward.

The horses, ever on the alert like their sun-browned masters, pricked up their ears and listened also.

The night was clear and promised to be starlit ere long, and the Champions listened with strange emotions to the voice that rung out with the distinctness of the notes of a silver bell:

"The time is near at hand, oh, men of Dynamite, when these mighty mountains will tremble and fall, and when every one of you who repents not will cry for mercy when there will be none! Within forty days, perhaps, the thunderbolts of Heaven will destroy you all in your wickedness, even as Sodom and Gomorrah were cut off in their sins! I come to you with a message from the Great Destroyer. I warn men to flee from the wrath to come, from the doom that will overtake the wicked in their guilt. For five years I've been in this business, and thousands have hearkened unto my voice and joined the elect!"

"Five years, eh?" laughed a coarse voice. "By Jupiter! the time has been a long while gettin' hyer."

At this retort there was a boisterous outburst of laughter which seemed to have silenced the Idaho Jonah.

Dick laid his bronzed hand on Dan's arm. "I'll bet my hat that war Rough Rob's voice," he said. "Let's get a look at the lay-out—at the preacher an' his congregation."

Champion Dan nodded, and the two men advanced down the darkening street of the mountain camp.

It might have been noticed that in the right hand of each was a cocked revolver.

When they drew rein again it was within sight of the border preacher and his hearers, the entire population of Camp Dynamite.

The keen eyes of the Champions saw them all. To their surprise they saw a young man with smooth face and long hair standing on a rough deal-table, which had probably been carried to the center of the square for his accommodation.

The table stood in the midst of the crowd which was composed of well built men in their shirt-sleeves, but armed to the teeth, as if they expected an invasion at any moment.

It was, perhaps, the most singular scene the two brothers had ever witnessed.

"Of course it's been a long time coming," cried the young preacher in response to the retort that had caused the laugh just spoken of. "All must hear of the coming destruction before the blow falls. None shall say that he was not warned. Oh men of Dynamite, will you stand and laugh at the message that comes direct from the place where the thunderbolts of vengeance are stored? Nothing shall escape; the hardened, the young and the beautiful shall perish if they repent not. Men call me Parson Paul, but I am the messenger of warning; I come among you to preach repentance and death!"

"Wal, we've heard enough ov it," said the same voice that had put in before, and this time the Champions saw the speaker. He was a giant in stature and, like themselves, broad-shouldered and long-haired; he stood almost on the outside of the crowd, overtopping many of his companions by a head.

"See hyer! thar's a camp south o' hyer that needs preachin'," continued this worthy. "Just keep yer best sarmon for the gophers ov Blue Blazes; you'll hev 'em on their knees cryin' for mercy before you've exhorted five minutes!"

How the eyes of the two Champions flashed at these flings at their camp.

"That's Rough Rob," said Dick between clinched teeth. "Cowards in Blue Blazes, eh? Let the sun answer when he glares down on this tiger den ag'in!"

The young parson was not inclined to accept Rough Rob's suggestion and started off again in the same strain as before.

"Oh, shut him off!" grated the bully of Dynamite. "The sarmon's ceased to be funny. Turn the table on the gospel-slinger."

The next moment the crowd before Rough Rob surged forward, and a second later the table was kicked over and Parson Paul landed unceremoniously in the dirt.

A loud laugh greeted this sudden interruption, but the two silent spectators received it with looks of resentment.

"That's in keepin' with the kyracter ov the galoots ov Dynamite," grated Champion Dan. "I'm in for showin' 'em that we ar' present."

"Not yet. Look yonder. What did Ruby Rose say about that sample ov femininity?"

As Dick spoke, he called his companion's attention to a woman who had just emerged from the crowd.

She was above medium hight, well formed, and, from what the Champions could see of her in the poor light, strikingly handsome.

"I would have let him go on to the end; he wasn't hurting anybody," they heard her say to the stalwart man who stepped to her side.

"Mebbe he wasn't, Doll, but we want no gospel-slingers in Dynamite," was the reply. "Mebbe he's a spy."

"Whose spy?" asked the woman, darting a quick look into the man's face. "Who'd send a cracked-brained boy like that on the most dangerous mission in the world to Camp Dynamite? Do you actually accuse Parson Paul of being a spy?" and Danger Doll seemed about to go back to where the young prophet was receiving the jeers of the crowd.

"Wal, not exactly that, but something more than preachin' fetched him hyer," was the reply snapped out syllable by syllable as the eyes of Rough Rob, who was the speaker, flashed accompaniment.

"I'll risk him in Dynamite," said the woman. "He may have an eye on Ruby Rose."

"That crack-skull?" And Danger Doll laughed. "She's bothered enough with Idaho Will, the boy you don't like, Rob."

"No," fairly hissed the Regulator. "I don't like him, an' I guess he knows it."

"Well, haven't I told you that she shall never be his wife?"

"Why don't you make her shake him, then?"

"I will: she wants company."

"Company?" growled Rough Rob, giving the woman a fierce look. "Keep them together till nothin' but the pistol can part 'em! You must do one of two things now—make Ruby shake that young rabbit, or I shake you forever!"

The woman's eyes flashed.

"Do you mean that?"

"I do, by heavens!" And he turned away.

"I wish the galoots of Blue Blazes would come."

Champion Dick's teeth fairly cracked. "The galoots ar' hyer!" he thundered.

CHAPTER III.

THE CHAMPION LIAR.

LIKE a clap of thunder from a clear sky, the startling announcement went full upon the ears of all.

Both Rough Rob and Danger Doll started back, the former with a hand at the butt of a silver-mounted revolver.

He saw at once the figures of the two men who had been brought to camp by his studied insult.

They appeared to have risen out of the solid earth, and instead of finding himself confronted by the entire population of the rival camp, Rough Rob saw himself face to face with only two men.

The whole gang also heard Champion Dick's words.

Danger Doll could not suppress an exclamation when she caught sight of the Twin Champions.

She seemed to know them.

The stalwart Regulator was the first person to recover.

"Yes, I see you ar' hyer!" he exclaimed giving the brothers look for look. "I told the boys thet ef the notice didn't rile the ranch, nothin' could. You're not alone, I guess."

"Alone we ar'!" answered Champion Dick, as he looked down his revolver into the faces that confronted him, for the crowd had left off teasing Parson Paul and had surged forward to the scene. "We ar' the backers ov Blue Blazes. We don't particularly want blood, but we're hyer to defend the honor ov thet camp whar insults hev been pocketed till it has become cowardice ter put up with any more."

There was no reply.

The desperate crowd looked at Rough Rob as if all depended on his action.

He had invited the Champions to Camp Dynamite through the medium of a low flung insult.

With the pards of Blue Blazes, forbearance had ceased to be a virtue, and they sat on their steeds before the fifty men-tigers of the Rockies, prepared to defend with their lives "the honor" of their camp.

"Think we hev'n't got the cause ov our'comin', eh?" continued Dick, and the next moment his left hand whipped a piece of paper from his pocket. "Hyer's the insult thet we found fastened to the door ov the Cold Deck Hotel at day-break. We ar' hyer ter say boldly, men ov Dynamite, thet the man who says with thet paper thet cowards only inhabit Blue Blazes, lies like a Comanche thief!"

Every eye was fastened on Rough Rob.

Danger Doll's eyes seemed to twinkle with delight, as if Dick's challenge was paying her for the threat made by the Regulator just before the Champions were discovered.

Rough Rob saw that he was completely covered by the revolvers of the twin brothers. He saw, too, that to back that paper with defiance, even with assembled and desperate Dynamite at his back, would seal his own doom in the twinkling of an eye.

"All right! We'll get acquainted by means ov thet paper," he said, but not until he had matured his plans.

The Champions looked disappointed.

"Is that what it meant?" asked Dick.

"Why not? What's ther use ov two camps existin' within thirty miles ov each other as though thar war an iceberg between 'em?"

Champion Dick looked at the crowd.

"Is that what that paper means?" he demanded, shaking the document in their faces. "Then, in the name of Heaven, why didn't you break the ice in a milder manner? This insult's but an excuse ter get Dynamite an' Blue Blazes acquainted? I don't believe it!"

"It means thet an' nothin' else," and up went Rough Rob's bronzed hand in solemn emphasis. "It may hev been a harsh way ov crackin' the ice, but I thought I'd make it effective while I war at it."

For the first time during the sharp colloquy the two Champions exchanged glances.

"Wal," said Dick, "ef thar's no fight in ye—ef ye intend ter sneak out ov the hull matter in this way—we'll go back an' report. Thet's what I call eatin' words without seasonin'. You needn't be backward, pards of Dynamite. The representatives ov Blue Blazes ar' before you, ready for any kind ov picnic you may choose. It's two ag'in' fifty, but thet's our lookout."

Rough Rob had backed down, but it was no

doubt because his life hung by a thread as delicate as that of the spider's spinning.

It was not so dark but that he could see the fingers of the brothers press the triggers of their revolvers.

The men who backed him held their own weapons ready to open fire, but he knew the first shot would signal their leader's death.

So Rough Rob was playing policy now. He was bound to lie it through to a certain spot where he could get the upper hand; then let the Twin Champions of Blue Blazes "look out!"

To Champion Dick's last word, which was a fair invitation for the men of Dynamite to sail in, or in other words, to open the battle, he again reiterated his deliberate falsehood that the document had been intended to secure an acquaintanceship between the two camps, nothing more.

There was "no fight" in the desperate Regulator under the circumstances, but deep in his dark eyes there danced a light which would have told the brothers of Blue Blazes, if they had seen it, that the affair was not yet ended.

The woman spoke not, but glanced from Rough Rob to the Champions, and back again.

"Come, Dan; the picnic's over," growled Dick, disgusted, and in tones intended for the crowd, as well as for his brother's ears. "It's the completest case of word-eatin' I ever saw. We don't associate with cowards an' galoots. Blue Blazes is above that!"

A slight movement of the bridle-reins turned the steeds' heads from the crowd, but the two Champions continued to face the Dynamiters.

"Repent, and fly from the wrath to come!" rung out a voice in the crowd. "When the trees tremble and the mountains fall, the thunderbolts of the Great Destroyer will burst upon the heads of the wicked!"

"Shut yer Gospel-trap!" thundered Rough Rob, and a moment later he rushed through the crowd, and lifted Parson Paul from the ground almost before the echoes of his last warning had died away.

"See hyer! We give you three minutes to git out ov camp. By Jupiter! if you're found hyer at the end ov that time, we'll burn ye alive. Take yer doctrine an' vamose this mountain ranch! No room fer falso prophets an spies hyer!"

In a moment, as it were, Rough Rob seemed to have forgotten the visit of the Champion pards, who, at the pistol's muzzle, had forced him to play the coward before the assembled camp.

He shook the young preacher until his teeth chattered, and would have supplemented his threat with greater violence, if a hand had not fallen on his arm.

"That'll do!" said a voice so calm and stern that the Regulator was forced to recognize it, and when he turned he confronted Danger Doll.

"Let the youth go about his business," she went on. "If he wants to stay here, he shall. The Champions from Blue Blazes have cowed you; you shall not vent your spite on this young man."

Even before the woman had finished, Parson Paul was loose, for Rough Rob had dropped him, and stepped back, eying Danger Doll savagely.

The boy could but stare at the interferer, for her flashing eyes rendered her beauty more conspicuous than before, and her jet-black hair, which had become disarranged, fell over her shoulders in wild disorder.

"She's a tigress when they stir her up," he could not resist saying to himself. "I hardly expected to meet such an enemy, but I'm in for it now, and I'm going to play my game through if it costs every drop of blood in my veins. I see nothing of the young one; but she will show up presently."

Finding that the woman could outface and outtalk him, Rough Rob retreated from the spot with ill grace, but not until he had shot Parson Paul a look which told him that, although Danger Doll had interfered, he had not relinquished his threat.

He went back to his pards like a baffled mad-dog.

"Wal, they came; they interviewed us, an' ther' isn't a dead man on either side," ventured one of the toughs as Rough Rob came up in anything but a good humor.

"No; but thar will be before mornin'!" he hissed, straightening before his pards. "They had me foul, had the dead drop on the hull camp. What could I do?"

"Only what ye did do, Rob—lie the thing through for policy. Thar war 'shoot' in the eyes ov both. They're trim chicks from the same egg!"

"Wolves from the same litter!" flashed the Regulator. "I thought our insult 'd fetch half ov Blue Blazes up hyer an' give us a picnic."

"Only two come an' thar war no picnic, either."

Rough Rob did not note the sarcasm illy concealed by the speaker's tones.

"The next time the dead drop'll be on our side," he growled. "Thar'll be rejoicin' in Blue Blazes when them two galoots get back. Idaho won't hold the lot. They came ter Dynamite; now, we're goin' ter return the visit!"

The crowd responded with a loud shout of eagerness and revenge.

"We'll draw up another document an' I'll nail it to the door ov the Cold Deck in the teeth ov Blue Blazes!" continued Rough Rob. "I've pulled up too many galoots among the camps ov the Gold Range ter be turned down by two men from Coward's Camp. At the end ov an hour from this time meet me hyer ready ter carry the war inter Africa. Two men came to Dynamite; fifty mounted wildcats go to Blue Blazes!"

Rough Rob did not tarry on the spot, but walked away in the darkness.

"No good fetched that young prophet hyer," he said to himself. "We don't want him, an' by George! he sha'n't stay. We've got one rabbit attached to this camp already, an' we won't put up with another. I lied it through neatly with the twin pards, didn't I? If they hadn't caught the drop on me, Blue Blazes would hev been deprived ov two ov her ornaments."

He did not stop until he found himself in the darkened interior of a cabin near one end of the camp.

A moment after he had crossed the threshold and closed the door he heard a step that made him turn; then came a loud rap as if from the butt of a revolver, while a voice called out:

"Rough Rob, ye'r wanted!"

Cocking his revolver the big rough went to the door, and as he opened it, he was pounced upon by a man as stalwart as himself, and before he could use his pistol a piece of paper was crowded into his mouth.

"Thar! Swallow yer insult to Blue Blazes, an' when you've digested it, come an' see us!"

The speaker relinquished Rough Rob and walked away in the dark.

It was Champion Dick!

CHAPTER IV.

PARSON PAUL GETS TWO BLACK EYES.

A BOY was leading a horse that walked lame by the bridle-rein over a rough and winding mountain trail.

A boy, we have said, for he could not have reached his eighteenth year, a boy well built, with a frank, open countenance, and clear blue eyes that bespoke jolly good nature.

His face was turned toward Camp Dynamite, and the hour at which we introduce him to the reader is the one that witnessed the events of the foregoing chapter.

That boy was not a stranger in the silver camp of the desperadoes.

For five years he had been one of its tenants, not very well liked by its ruling spirit, Rough Rob, but he had never exhibited a particle of fear in the Regulator's presence.

The boy's absence from Camp Dynamite during the visit of the Twin Champions had been occasioned by the horse he was now leading back—leading him because he was too lame to ride.

The animal had wandered from the camp corral, and horses like him were too scarce among the Rockies to be permitted to stray about at their leisure.

Idaho Will had spent five days in the search which proved successful at last, and he was now nearing Camp Dynamite again with the valuable steed which had lamed itself in some manner among the mountains.

He knew nothing of what had happened during his hunt, only he knew that Ruby Rose would greet him with a smile, and that Rough Rob would bestow upon him those sinister looks of hate for which he was famous.

The young horse-hunter entered camp with a sparkle of pride in his eyes, and, although the hour was not late, he found it unusually quiet.

In fact at a first glance he was inclined to pronounce it entirely deserted.

Not a human being rewarded his gaze until, having restored the truant horse to his old quarters, he rapped at the door of a cabin near the scene of Parson Paul's effort.

"Back again. Ah! you've come too late to share in the man-hunt."

Idaho Will turned quickly at the sound of these words, and then started toward the person with an exclamation of joy.

"I am back and with the horse, too!" he said, holding out both hands to the young girl who confronted him with satisfaction in her eyes. "What time I come back too late for?—what man-hunt!"

"I forgot that you do not, can not know, since it all happened since you left," was the answer, and before Idaho Will could question her again Ruby Rose proceeded to narrate the story of the Champions' visit, and of all that had occurred in camp since his departure.

The boy listened with unabated interest to the close; there was a charm in the girl's voice, and, besides, the daring of the Twin Champions was ahead of any feat of bravery he had ever heard of.

"I should have liked to see those fellows!" he exclaimed. "They must have looked like heroes, Ruby."

"I did not see them face Rough Rob and his pards, but I can imagine how they did it. My warning before they got to camp, had no effect on them."

"Does Rough Rob know that you encountered the Champions in the mountains?" asked the youth with anxiety and eagerness.

"No; but, what if he did?" the girl answered, her eyes kindling with a fearless light. "When I fear the bully of the silver region may I forget my best friends!"

Idaho Will bestowed a look of pride on the girl who, in the midst of Camp Dynamite, was not afraid to talk thus.

She seemed to increase an inch in stature while the defiance fell from her tongue.

"He hates me, too," Idaho Will said with a quiet smile of determination. "Do you know why, Ruby?"

"Yes; because we are friends," was the prompt reply.

"And I long to tell this mountain giant to his teeth that he can't separate us! He has gone out of his way twenty times of late to exhibit his hate in various ways; I more than half believe that he turned my horse loose. Let me obtain certain evidence to this effect, and Rough Rob shall know that there is one person in Camp Dynamite he can't bully. And so they've all gone to pay Blue Blazes a visit?"

"All but mother and I, and Parson Paul."

"Where is this young preacher?" asked the boy quickly. "I have a curiosity to see him, Ruby."

"Loitering somewhere about camp," Ruby Rose replied in a manner which indicated that her estimation of Parson Paul was quite limited, and that little not in his favor.

"Very well, we'll find him, then, accidentally, perhaps."

The girl made no reply as if she wished to discourage conversation about the young prophet of impending destruction, and five minutes later the young couple had separated with interchanges of friendship, and Idaho Will was discussing a night meal within the walls of his own shanty.

The interior of the cabin was lighted by a candle which afforded more than an ordinary light, and the youth had just finished his repast when the unlocked door was gently pushed open and there stood before him the very person he had expressed a desire to see—Parson Paul.

For the first time the two youths stood face to face, for at sight of the prophet, Idaho Will jumped from his three-legged stool and advanced a stride toward the door.

A moment of embarrassing silence ensued and then Parson Paul spoke:

"So you're back with the missing horse, eh?" he said. "Did he lead you a long chase?"

Idaho Will almost smiled at the abruptness and novelty of these questions.

"A pretty long trail it was, but I got there," he replied, a glow of pride giving animation to his eyes. "Are you interested in that horse?"

"Not at all, but I'm glad you found him. Maybe you don't know me. I'm Parson Paul, and my duty is to warn men to turn from their wickedness before the final and impending destruction comes."

"It's a thankless mission in these parts, isn't it?" laughed Idaho Will. "I mean, you haven't made many converts in Camp Dynamite."

"Not a soul, but ere long they will wish they had listened," solemnly answered the boy prophet. "When these mountains reel like drunkards, and the trees are uprooted, when the sky becomes like a sheet of molten brass—"

"There! I don't want any sermon," interrupted Idaho Will. "I'll take it all for granted. I welcome you to Camp Dynamite. Rough Rob doesn't take well to your preaching, I hear."

"No!"

With the utterance of the monosyllable the

eyes of the speaker seemed to emit sparks of fire.

He had no good corner in his heart for the giant bully of Camp Dynamite.

"He never takes well to anything save cards and lassoes," smiled Idaho Will. "He hates you, eh?"

"Yes."

"Then that ought to make us friends, for he hates me too."

"And so do I!"

Idaho Will looked as if a thunderbolt had dropped at his feet.

He recoiled several inches and stared at the speaker who had spoken the four words in tones not to be mistaken.

"Yes," continued Parson Paul, as he came forward with flashing eyes fixed on the young Dynamiter, "yes, I hate you, too. I didn't know until to-night that you were here, but the moment I found it out I began to hate you. We never met before to-night; but that makes no difference. By heavens! Idaho Will, as they call you, I could scatter your brains over your shanty walls!"

The Dynamiter was too astonished to articulate a single word in reply.

As Parson Paul finished, his hand flew to a belt beneath his coat, and the next instant Idaho Will was looking down the muzzle of a revolver that covered his head.

"You're in my road!" grated the boy prophet. "By the blazing stars! I ought to settle it all here so far as you're concerned. Look into this instrument of death, and swear to leave Camp Dynamite, never to come back without my permission."

Idaho Will's eyes flashed defiance before his lips parted to reply.

"Leave Dynamite at your command?" he cried. "Well, I guess not, prophet of evil!"

"Is that your final answer?"

"It is!"

The next second Idaho Will darted straight at Parson Paul despite the menace of the cocked revolver, and, quicker than a flash, knocked up the arm that leveled it, and threw its owner headlong toward the door!

"It's best to shoot the minute you get the drop," he said as he leaped after the falling youth. "I guess I've got some rights in Dynamite that a chattering fool is bound to respect. Well, I'm glad you hate me, seeing what you are. I don't want your friendship. I am able to take care of myself!"

Parson Paul would have gained his feet in a minute if the enraged young Dynamiter had not thrown himself upon him, and proceeded to bestow a severe chastisement with his fists.

"I'll give you something to hate me for!" he cried as he delivered blow upon blow in rapid succession.

"I ought to kick you out of camp, to say the least, but you've got something to remember me by, the blackest pair of eyes in Dynamite!"

Idaho Will desisted, and helping the discomfited youth onto his feet, hustled him with no ceremony at all from the shanty, and, without waiting for threats or epithets, slammed the heavy door in his face.

The unexpected assault, the merited whipping and the ejection did not occupy three minutes.

"That seals your doom, Idaho William!" hissed the individual who faced the shanty in the starlight and shook his fist at the door. "I haven't crossed mountains and rivers for nothing—not I; and I'm not going to be baffled by you. I've got a foothold in this camp, and the hate of Rough Rob and yours cannot break it loose. What brought me to Idaho? Ha! ha! let my actions tell. For every blow you dealt awhile ago I'll have an ounce of blood. They call me Parson Paul; but I'm more devil than prophet!"

Idaho Will might have heard these words if he had listened intently at his door, but he did not, and when Paul had given vent to his spite in emphatic language, he walked away muttering still maledictions against the youth whose fists had punished him.

"You're getting along too rapidly," said a voice near by, and Parson Paul wheeled to find himself face to face with Danger Doll, Rough Rob's female pard, and the Queen of Camp Dynamite. "I told you to go easy and not provoke him, but you had to seek him out, get up a quarrel, and get whipped. This is bad policy if you want to remain in Dynamite."

The boy prophet looked at the beautiful woman for a moment and made no reply.

"Why your face is getting dark in several places," went on Danger Doll coming up closer and leaning forward.

"It ought to, beat up as it has been."

"With what?"

"With that young devil's fists!" growled Paul. "Never mind! When my time comes, and it shall come soon, it shall be an ounce of blood for each blow! He and I can't live here at the same time."

"I expect not," smiled the woman. "One of you must leave camp. He won't go."

"Neither will I! By heavens! I'll stay here and fight it out if it takes a lifetime! I'm no spy, and no coward. I am here on business."

CHAPTER V.

THE CHAMPIONS CATCH A TIGRESS.

DANGER DOLL looked into the speaker's eyes, but made no reply. They were burning like two coals of fire.

"Well," he suddenly snapped, "the girl has come back, but I'm in no condition to be introduced."

"To-morrow—"

"When my eyes will probably be closed?—not much!" was the quick interruption. "Maybe I had better leave Camp Dynamite till I get presentable again. Mind you, it shall not be for good. I am coming back! I am not going away for good till I've settled with that boy and accomplished my mission. Where can I go?"

"Not two miles from here is an excellent retreat," answered Danger Doll, pleased at the young prophet's suggestion to leave camp. "I am willing for you to come back, and when you do come, I hope you'll find things in better shape than they are just now."

"If they are not, I'll put them in shape," he hissed, shutting his hands and sending a fierce look toward Idaho Will's shanty. "Direct me to this hiding-place."

"I will guide you to it," said the woman. "I know these mountains as the Comanche knows the plains."

"How long have you been here?"

"Five years, or ever since Camp Dynamite was founded."

"Did you know Rough Rob before that?"

Danger Doll hesitated for a moment, and then said:

"Yes."

"Have you ever been in Sacramento?" was the next question, which made the woman start, though the questioner perceived it not.

"I was never there," was the reply, in tones which seemed to impress Parson Paul that the words covered a secret of some kind. "I came up here from Santa Fe."

"With the men who planted this camp here?"

After another slight hesitation, another "yes." The boy prophet seemed satisfied with the answers he had received, for he did not continue them, but turned the subject back to his proposed retirement from the mountain town.

Danger Doll's offer to guide him to the retreat indicated was accepted, and a few moments later the pair thus strangely thrown together were walking over a trail which led them from Camp Dynamite.

It was plainly apparent now that something besides preaching the end of all created things had brought Parson Paul to the camp, and what seemed stranger still, Danger Doll had taken a fancy to him.

To be more explicit, he had told her an adroit story, which had excited her attention from the very first.

He pretended to be the possessor of a secret of the most valuable nature, and he almost admitted to the woman, in so many words, that his prophesying was but a cover for his real mission.

There was buried somewhere in the mountains not a vein of silver, but one of gold whose richness was almost fabulous. He professed to have a chart, which he took good care not to let the camp Delilah see, which would eventually guide him to the exact spot where the vein cropped out.

With this adroit story, whether true or not, it is not for us to say here, he beguiled the Queen of Camp Dynamite, and found in her from the first, both a friend and a dupe.

Danger Doll did not regret that she had saved Parson Paul from Rough Rob's clutches. The Regulator would probably have shaken the boy to death, and then she would never have heard of this wonderful vein of gold.

So she guided Parson Paul to a cavern among the mountains, and about two miles from Camp Dynamite.

He was safe there, she told him, and could remain secure until his face had resumed its wonted color, and he was in a presentable condition.

"I'll play my part of the game with an adroit-

ness that will surprise you," thought Danger Doll to herself as she hurried back over the trail toward camp. "I will get to the gold vein about the same time you make it, Parson Paul. It wouldn't have done to let you stay in camp, for the first thing I knew you and Idaho would be together again. I'll see that Will doesn't jeopardize the existence of the gold secret. Maybe you don't want me to possess it. Well, I haven't showed you what I've got to trade for it!" and Danger Doll laughed.

There was a world of subtle meaning in her last sentence, and it made her dark eyes glow like living coals.

"By Jove! you're a laugher from Hilarity!" suddenly rung out a voice, at the first sound of which Danger Doll stopped and looked forward.

"The Champions of Blue Blazes!" dropped from her tongue at the first glance. "Your place is at home if you want to see the men-tigers of Camp Dynamite."

"What's that, my Dynamite pink?" cried Champion Dick, leaning forward in his saddle and scrutinizing the woman's face. "Hev the seraphs ov the mountains marched down on Blue Blazes?"

"They've all gone, armed to the teeth."

"Headed by the boss wilicat ov all?"

"Led by Rough Rob, the Regulator."

"Then," laughed Dick, with a quick glance at his brother, "then, thar will be a picnic."

"They went down to kill," said the woman.

"Ov course! It's not likely that they took any olive branches along."

The Champions laughed fearlessly and in concert.

"Come up closer," Dick said to the woman, who advanced with her piercing eyes fixed upon him until she reached his horse's side.

"Well, I am here," she said.

In the silence that followed her announcement, the mountain brothers studied her face in a manner suspicious and irritating, to Danger Doll at least.

Had they ever met her before?

"I'm not the beauty I used to be," she said suddenly, bursting into a derisive laugh, but the men saw that, despite her eight and thirty years, she was beautiful still, and in stature perfect, with the figure of a princess of royal blood.

"Hang me! if you ain't a living chromo yet," averred Champion Dan, the first of the brothers to put an end to the inspection. "I can't say that yer daughter resembles you, although she's no slouch in good looks."

They both saw the start that the woman gave at this allusion to Ruby Rose.

"When did you see her?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, do you suppose we've lived at Blue Blazes all these years without knowin' thet such a lovely flower were bloomin' only thirty miles away?" laughed Dick. "What do you take us for, Danger Doll?"

"For two mountain gentlemen."

"Thet's good! By Jupiter, woman, you're a trump card! Ar' you goin' back to Dynamite?"

"Yes."

"We'll go along."

Danger Doll could not repress an exclamation of aversion.

What! those two dread brothers going back to Camp Dynamite, deserted and unprotected—back to the place where Ruby Rose was?

The bare thought of it sent a shudder to the woman's heart. If they went there, what would they not do to pay Rough Rob beforehand for what he was likely to do at Blue Blazes?

"Won't you ride?" asked Dick, leaning over to assist Danger Doll to a seat before him.

"No," she answered, shrinking away. "We all thought you had gone home."

"So also Rough Rob and his pards thought, no doubt. I got the turn on the Regulator in front of his cabin, and had the pleasure of crammin' his written insult down his throat. Ho! ho! how he spluttered and fought, but it wouldn't do. I had the game-cock of Dynamite foul!" And Champion Dick laughed at the recollection of the trick he had served Rough Rob.

He concluded abruptly:

"If you will not ride to Dynamite, you may walk beside us. Come, Dan, we'll go an' inspect the nest while the rat's away."

"You'd better go an' help the pards of Blue Blazes," flashed the woman.

"We'll be thar when Rough Rob presents his card," was the answer, as Champion Dick patted the flank of his well-limbed horse. "Off we ar' for camp. Come along, Danger Doll. Mebbe we'll show our hand among the shanties."

Danger Doll found herself walking between

the steeds of the mountain brothers when they started on once more.

They had placed her in that position suddenly, as if afraid she would attempt to desert them, and whenever she glanced up she saw that they were slyly watching her.

It did not take the fast-walking horses long to reach the silent and almost deserted camp.

The two Champions cocked their revolvers in the outskirts, and kept on with every sense on the alert.

What had they to fear if Rough Rob and all his pards had gone to Blue Blazes?

Perhaps they doubted the woman's statement to this effect.

The ride down the street toward Danger Doll's cabin was uninteresting.

Nobody appeared in the star-lit street.

"Nary a rat in the nest!" Champion Dick exclaimed, and then he leaned toward his pard, and added in a whisper: "Let's burn the place."

But Dan shook his head:

"Don't burn the daisy out," he said.

"Ah! I had forgotten the girl!" and then he looked down at the woman who had just spoken:

"Here's where I live," she said, pointing to a cabin, a little more elegant than the rest. "If you'll wait a moment I'll show you something."

Before either of the twin pards could frame a reply, Danger Doll darted out from between the horses and sprung into the cabin.

"Mebbe she intends to present the girl," said Dan.

The girl? No!

Half a minute later the queen of Camp Dynamite reappeared at the open door, and the Champions of Blue Blazes recoiled at sight of her.

"Hands up!" rung from her lips, and over the gleaming revolvers which she thrust forward. "You came here for blood, and by the stars above us! you are liable to cause some to be spilled, but it will be your own! I was never suckled at the breast of Mercy. Hands up, or die!"

It was a terrible summons, and the voice and looks of the woman who had planted herself in the doorway must have appeared to the two men the emphasis of death.

"I don't wait a moment," continued Danger Doll. "I saw you hold the drop on Rough Rob since sundown, but, fool-like, you didn't shoot. I have a mortal right to hate you two men. What are you going to do?"

Instead of throwing up his hands, in surrender, Champion Dick, cool as coolness itself, leaned forward until his face was almost between the leveled revolvers.

"Sprinkle our brains on the ground, Danger Doll, an' Blue Blazes, not me, will avenge the theft of flesh an' blood!" he hissed through clinched teeth.

A strange cry burst from the woman's throat; she dropped the weapons and staggered back.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BACK TRAIL.

"WHAT did you mean by the words that made Danger Doll drop her shooters an' stagger into the shanty when she had the drop on us?" asked Champion Dan as he looked into Dick's face five miles out of Camp Dynamite and on the mountain trail that led to Blue Blazes.

"It war an arder I shot somewhat at random," was the evasive answer.

"But it hit the bull's eye."

"Seemed ter," and Dick looked away to avoid his brother's eyes.

"She looked as if a ghost had handed her his card," continued Dan.

"It unnerved her so thet she couldn't hev held a pistol steady ter save her life. We got out ov thet dilemma mighty slick, Dick. I saw 'shoot' in her eyes the moment she appeared in the door with the big droppers."

Champion Dick did not speak, but rode on like a man wrestling with a mental problem.

All at once, ten minutes later, he turned suddenly upon his pard and his hand dropped upon his arm.

"Will you do what I say?" he asked.

The response was prompt and brief.

"Yes."

"Go on to Blue Blazes an' help the boys meet Rough Rob an' his pards when they come."

"An' you?" cried Dan astonished.

"I'm not goin' thar."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm needed elsewhar."

"At Camp Dynamite?"

"I can't exactly say; only, I know that I'm not goin' on."

The Twin Champions had halted in the mountain trail, and Dick was holding out his hand to his pard.

"To-morrow night at eight or tharabouts we will meet at the rock-tree," he went on. "Everybody knows whar that is."

"An' you will then tell me why you turned back?"

"P'raps."

Dan did not look satisfied with the reply, yet he did not murmur, but laid his hand in the one stretched toward him and grasped it warmly.

A minute later the two pards had separated and were riding in contrary directions, Dan toward Blue Blazes, and Dick back over the trail they had just covered.

We will follow Dick.

Thoughtful as his countenance showed, and with a look of resolution in his eyes, he rode toward Camp Dynamite.

Back to the home of the most dangerous woman among the silver mountains!

Some of the brightest stars had set since he left the place but a short time before, but enough were in the sky to show the rider the dark shanties that made up the camp.

At the edge of the town he slipped from the saddle and crept away, leaving his horse to await his return in the shadow of one of the huts.

Champion Dick was now a man with a motive, but what was it?

He made his way down the street inspecting the different buildings as he passed until he halted at the door of one which he seemed to recognize.

"I left her hyer," he said, speaking to himself for the first time since parting with his brother. "That word-arrr ov mine went so swift to the mark thet I thought I'd shoot another from the same bow."

The last words brought a smile to Champion Dick's lips and a twinkle of delight to his eyes.

He glided to the threshold of the hut and put his ear at the door.

Not a sound came from the inside.

"I hate ter disturb ye, Queen Doll," he said; "but—"

At that instant the door was opened without previous warning, and the stalwart figure of the Champion of Blue Blazes straightened with an ejaculation of astonishment.

"You back again?" said the person who suddenly confronted Dick, a woman with eyes that seemed ready to fly from their sockets from amazement.

"What do you want?"

The mountain pard could hardly repress a laugh at the speaker's fright.

"I'm back hyer arter the truth," he said, and quick as a flash his hand struck her wrist and closed there like the talons of a hawk.

"Not so loud: you'll rouse Ruby."

"Is she here?"

"Why not? Isn't she my—"

"No lies, Danger Doll!" and Dick dragged the woman over the threshold. "Don't lie to a man who wants the truth as bad as I do. Come away from the shanty if yer don't want Ruby ter open her eyes an' see me hyer."

The fingers of the man from Blue Blazes seemed to sink to the woman's bone as he led her down the street toward the spot where he had left his horse.

She regarded him with eyes that scintillated like the orbs of the robbed pantheress, but not a word passed her lips until they reached the trusty animal standing where the Champion had left him.

"So Ruby is your child?" said he, whirling upon her.

"Yes. Haven't I told you so before?" was the quick retort.

"Whar war she born?"

"In Camp Dangerous in the San Juan mountains."

"When?"

"A little more than sixteen years ago."

"Whar's her father?"

Danger Doll glued her lips together resolutely, and gave Dick a flashing look.

"Answer me!" he said madly.

"Am I on the witness stand?"

"Yes, an' I am judge an' jury. Whar's Ruby's father?"

"Dead."

"Quite likely; the Vigilantes hung him by mistake, didn't they?"

"No; he died in Sacramento."

"His name?"

"Major Catlin of the army, and a better man never drew a sword."

A gleam of incredibility brightened in Dick's eyes.

"You tell a pretty story," he said to the woman who backed her assertions with a brazen look; "but unfortunately it sticks in your throat every now an' then."

"What! do you accuse me of lying?"

"Kinder so," laughed Champion Dick.

"Don't you believe that I am Ruby's mother?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because she doesn't look like you, an' because I know that Major Catlin was never your husband."

"Very well," snapped Danger Doll. "If you expected falsehoods, why did you question me?"

"To see how much string you'd take if you got a chance. Now, let me talk. A few years ago I had a sister, Agnes by name. She died in Sacramento City, leavin' I am reliably informed, a girl baby a few days old. She was nursed through her brief illness by a woman who was known there as Monte Maud, and after my sister's death the nurse and the child disappeared."

Dick paused, and saw the Queen of Dynamite regarding him with her defiant look.

"I got on the track of Monte Maud a few months afterward," he continued; "but lost it in the gold mountains in the upper part of the State. The child was still in her charge, an' doin' well. Now, woman, ar' you goin' ter stand thar an' tell me that you ar' not Monte Maud, an' that Ruby Rose is not the child born in California sixteen year's ago?"

Not a muscle of the woman's face quivered; she did not start back at the Champion's words, but stood her ground unflinchingly and glared at him like a tigress.

"I have already told you who I am," she said. "I see no reason to lie. I am not a saint. I lay no claim to perfection. You have insulted me with the infamous declaration that Major Catlin was not my husband. I am now Danger Doll, of Dynamite. I have never been Monte Maud. Ruby Rose is my child. Do you want me to swear it in the presence of Heaven?" and the woman threw one hand aloft and drew her faultless figure to its true height.

Champion Dick looked nonplused at Danger Doll's retort, and the woman's quick eyes caught his situation.

"Accusation is one thing, proof another," she went on. "You'll have to hunt Monte Maud elsewhere than here. I have borne but two names in my lifetime—Dora Catlin and Danger Doll. My lines didn't fall in pleasant places after the death of my husband. I drifted among wild men and wild scenes. But why give you a history of my career? You don't want to listen to it. Monte Maud? Not I, Champion Dick."

"But you said that you had cause to hate Dan an' I when you had uskivered by yer droppers," persisted Dick, calmly.

"So I did, and so I have!" was the quick answer. "You came to Dynamite to shoot Rough Rob. He is my friend."

"Husband number two?" grinned the man from Blue Blazes. "He isn't as handsome as the major war; but he's a bigger devil."

"You size him well. Now, if you think Ruby Rose is your sister's child, go to camp an' take her; but woe to the man who robs me of my own offspring!"

There was a hard, cold threat in the last sentence.

Champion Dick made no reply; he took no step toward Camp Dynamite.

Had the woman bluffed him with her brazen face, glittering eyes and broad assertions?

Was he willing to say that he had waked up the wrong person, that he was on the wrong trail?

Certain it was that Danger Doll had shaken Champion Dick's confidence.

"What made you hit on me for Monte Maud?" she suddenly exclaimed, breaking in upon his cogitations. "Do I look like the child-stealer? Is there a resemblance between me and the woman who robbed your sister after death—robbed her of her babe?"

"I never saw Monte Maud," admitted Dick.

"And yet you come to me and say that I am a woman you have never seen!" flashed Danger Doll. "After fifteen years you pounce upon me, and say: 'Here; give up my sister's child,' and command me to put into your hands my own daughter. I thought the Champions of Blue Blazes were men—not robbers."

Champion Dick no longer clutched the wrist he had held.

All of a sudden Danger Doll had jerked herself loose, and now stood, the very picture of fury

and indignation in the soft morning starlight, entirely free!

"Go elsewhere and hunt for Monte Maud," she hissed. "My trail is not her trail; my child is not the one *she* stole from the dead mother's arms. If you remain in these parts I may turn hunter. Go back to Blue Blazes and meet the men who have gone to burn it down. I hate the ground that bears you up. I, Monte Maud? A blacker lie than that never dropped from human lips! I am scarcely woman now; I am nearly all tigress!"

The disconcerted giant could readily believe this.

He stepped back looking at her still and pointed toward the mountain camp.

"Go back and keep guard whar I found you," he said laying his hand on the steed's rein.

"You don't apologize, then?" Danger Doll exclaimed.

"Wal, hardly," was the answer and Champion Dick sprung to saddle.

"Then take what comes from my hands hereafter! I will show you that I can make trails, and red ones, too, as well as the boastful Champion of the coward's roost! You've waked up the wrong person, Champion Dick."

"All right!" flung back the mountaineer. "A lie well stuck to is better than a loose grip on the truth." And the Champion touched his horse's flanks with the spur and left Danger Doll, a statue of madness in the starlight.

"A lie well stuck to, eh?" echoed the woman, as horse and man vanished. "May I furnish the mountain vultures with a meal if I don't have the Champion's blood!"

Danger Doll stood a moment longer on the spot; then went back to Dynamite.

If Champion Dick had crept at her heels he would have seen her bend over a sleeping girl and heard her whisper:

"You're worth your weight in gold, my Sacramento rose!"

CHAPTER VII.

DYNAMITE MEETS BLUE BLAZES.

"HELLO! Blue Blazes?"

Rough Rob, the big regulator, turned to the men at his back and pointed forward.

All at once the mountain town, the home of the Twin Champions, had burst into view, and the fifty men wolves of Camp Dynamite, looking over their captain's outstretched arm, saw the numerous shanties that lay in the last beams of the setting sun.

"We're goin' ter nail ter the door ov ther Cold Deck Hotel suthin' more terrible than the document the galoots flaunted in our faces last night!" grated the Regulator. "Thet's what we're hyer for?"

The pards of Dynamite had not tramped the thirty miles that lay between the rival camps for nothing.

They had come to Blue Blazes for a fight, to pit themselves against the two Champions and their pards, and to settle forever the question of superiority.

They had decided, on the march, not to open the ball in the broad light of day, and had managed to reach the vicinity of the town when the shadows had grown long once more.

"I hope we'll find the twin galoots at home!" Rough Rob continued, and his eyes, burning with eagerness, attested the genuineness of the wish. "By Jupiter! the shrinkin' from the dropper will be on t'other side now. Just wait, my twin daisies, till we git ther drop; then we'll show you what it costs ter cram a paper inter Rough Rob's mouth!"

The sun disappeared behind the mountain whose huge shadow covered the whole camp, and the fifty vengeance-seekers crept forward, each with a revolver in his right hand.

Down upon Blue Blazes they swooped, like so many eagles, or like a pack of wolves nearing a sheep-fold.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed the giant Regulator, halting at the first shanties and sending a glance of astonishment among his followers. "Blamed ef we hev'n't frightened the mountain buzzards from their nest. Not a man at home, boys. The town's empty!"

Deserted?

Did not Rob think of an ambush at that moment?

Could he believe that a lot of men, led by Champion Dick and Champion Dan, had deserted their silver town to the mercy of him and his Dynamiters without a show of resistance, without even waiting till they came in sight?

The very silence that brooded over the place at the foot of the mountain that shadowed it seemed to mean more than desertion.

"Come on! We'll show the cowards when

they sneak back that we've been hyer!" cried Rough Rob, and he led his bronzed followers straight toward the hotel, which was the most conspicuous building in the camp.

Before leaving Dynamite he had prepared a manifesto with which it was intended to adorn the door of the structure, a warning and a challenge to all who had the temerity to cross the will of the pards of the northern camp.

There was something imposing in the crowd that went down the narrow street of Blue Blazes in dark shirts, slouch hats, and armed to the teeth.

Their eyes seemed to emit flashes of rage; they were as eager as their leader to wipe out in blood the "insult" to which they had been subjected.

Not a human face rewarded their looks as they advanced; not a command startled them.

They were to have a bloodless victory, to march back discomfited, and disappointed.

So they thought.

The Cold Deck Hotel was the most conspicuous building in Blue Blazes because it stood at the end of the street down which the bronzed vengeance-hunters tramped with Rough Rob at their head.

It was a two-story shanty with six or seven little rooms, the largest one being the reception-room on the first floor, and not infrequently used for a gambling-room, for when times were flush in Blue Blazes, as they often were, the wild citizens took pleasure in fleecing one another.

There never had been much regular hotel business in the camp, for the transient custom was small, and the Cold Deck had no regular boarders; still, out of courtesy, and to keep abreast of the times, the two-story shanty was known as a public house.

In front of the hotel and the full length of it ran a porch wide enough to contain a chair, if such a useful piece of furniture had found its way to Blue Blazes, and just beyond the porch was the door that opened into the interior of the building.

"If the birds hev taken flight mebbe they left a few squar' drinks in the nest!" Rough Rob laughed as his heavy boot struck the porch floor.

The next moment he reached the door and lifting one foot bestowed upon it a kick heavy enough to hurl it from its hinges.

As it was, the door flew open with a noise almost loud enough to disturb the occupants of the bush-fenced cemetery on the mountain-side, and the following second the air rung with revolver-shots!

Behind the broad-shouldered Regulator men reeled and tumbled in every direction!

He felt the wind of bullets on his cheeks, he felt them clip his jacket, yet not one inflicted a wound!

"Great Jerusalem!" ejaculated the Dynamiter as he staggered back from the deadly flashes that cast the interior of the Cold Deck in flame.

He had found the pards of Blue Blazes at home, he had marched straight into a terrible ambush!

Why was he not riddled?

Rough Rob could not account for his escape.

The bullets of the ambushers whistled all around him, and he soon found himself the only living occupant of the porch.

Scarcely a minute had intervened between the opening of the door and the death of the roughs who had followed him from their mountain ranch.

In the storm of lead and death, Rough Rob seemed to have forgotten that his hands clutched cocked revolvers.

The terrible volley had come like the falling of a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky.

"Nobody but fools come to Blue Blazes with droppers cocked in their paws!" said a voice which halted Rough Rob among the ten prostrate forms. "Galoots ov Dynamite, you'd better go back to your dens!"

There was a familiar tone to the voice that made Rough Rob grind his teeth.

"Come out an' show yerselves!" he cried defiantly. "Ten men from fifty leaves forty still an' in this instance forty of the biggest devils thet ever raised a mountain shooter. Come out an' face the party what came hyer ter clean out this buzzard nest, er die!"

The answer was a coarse laugh and there stepped from the building and upon the porch two men whose shoulders touched as they came forward with leveled revolvers.

"The twin galoots!" spoke twenty men in concert.

"Galoots ef you wan't it so; we're not partic'lar," smiled Champion Dick with a glance

from Rough Rob to the crowd at his back. "Fix our names ter suit yerselves. The honor ov Blue Blazes is ter be maintained at all hazards. What's yer opinion on the coward business just now, Rough Rob?"

Under his heavy mustache the bully of Camp Dynamite bit his lip, and behind his midnight lashes his fierce orbs blazed.

"You got the call on us when we warn't lookin' for it," he said like a man who finds himself expected to say something. "It's no fair shake—an ambush like this."

"Not when two men meet fifty?" laughed the Champion.

"Two men!" echoed Rough Rob mechanically.

Had all that rapid firing, that merciless slaughter, been carried on by the two men who now faced him and his mountain mob?

Such was the assertion, and he could not contradict it.

"We're ther batteries thet opened on yer," continued Champion Dick. "Ef two men kin spread such a lay-out on the ground ez thet one, what might ther hull camp do?"

There was no answer.

"You'll about face an' go back ter Dynamite, wiser an' sadder men," Dick went on, a tinge of merriment in his voice. "Hyerafter when you get up a written insult please don't fetch it ter this saints' rest ter be posted. We're all cowards hyer an' we're afraid ov such documents! Go back to Dynamite!"

The mad men at Rough Rob's back heard his teeth crack as he whirled upon them.

"Back to camp, they say!" he hissed in tones that reached the Champion's ears. "Shall we go?"

The men glanced from their infuriated captain to the two cool men who stood side by side on the blood-sprinkled porch with leveled revolvers.

It was a striking tableau, and one which a look or a word might dissipate in a terrible manner.

The seconds that flew by were momentous ones.

"Curse yer picters! we go back," said Rough Rob, turning to the Champions of the silver camp. "Hyerafter we'll settle fer this ambush."

"Whenever you please," was the reply.

"Will you take yer pards along?"

"No! let 'em stay whar they died."

"All right."

The big Regulator stepped back.

"Face about!" he said to his men, and as they turned sullenly and without a word, he threw a mad look at the brothers.

"Be this the beginnin'!" he shouted. "By Jerusalem! the end shall beat the start all hol'er! Big as Idaho is, it's too little for both Dynamite an' Blue Blazes. One must go under."

"An' one come out on top, eh, Rough Rob?" laughed Champion Dick. "Hurrah for the upper dog in this fight!"

The sole reply was the grating of teeth and looks of undying hatred, and the next moment the discomfited and defeated pards of Dynamite had turned their backs on the occupants of the porch.

Sullen and with curses on their lips they marched back over the ground they had lately trod with eager feet.

It was the Champions' day; but Dynamite's might be near at hand.

All at once the air behind the mountain roughs rung with cheers.

Rough Rob stopped and looked back.

The street near the Cold Deck swarmed with men who threw their hats toward the sky as they cheered the Champions' victory.

The Dynamiters looked surprised.

"Heavens! we must hev been kivered by their revolvers all the time," growled Rough Rob. "Come on. Let us think ov to-morrow!"

CHAPTER VIII.

REVOLVER SUASION.

BLOOD having been spilled, henceforth it was to be war to the knife between the rival camps.

Rough Rob's "to-morrow" did not mean the succeeding day, for when it broke, instead of resuming the attack the Dynamite bully and his pards were almost within sight of their old rendezvous.

As they had turned their backs upon the Champion brothers, so they kept them thus turned until, breathing maledictions on their heads, they stalked into Camp Dynamite like beaten but revengeful lions.

"Back ag'in, an' whipped!" hissed Rough Rob, as, tired and hungry, he crossed the thresh-

old of the shanty and made a charge on the larder.

"Whipped, did you say?" said a voice at the door. "I thought you were going to annihilate Blue Blazes?"

There seemed to be an accent of triumph in the speaker's tones; anyhow, Rough Rob's brows darkened and his eyes kindled.

He took one mad stride toward the speaker, but seeing who it was, he stopped short and looked into her face.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said. "Wal, we didn't exactly annihilate Blue Blazes, but thet's no sign thet it'll not be done before long. We ran ag'in a snag an' had ter retreat, which we did in good order."

"With ten men less than when you went away."

"Who told you?"

"I counted those who came back."

"An' you counted forty, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Thet's right. We left ten Dynamiters dead before the best pistols in the galoots' camp."

"Don't those pistols belong to the two brothers?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. You didn't fight, then?"

"What little blood-lettin' thar war, war all on one side. Come in an' talk to me while I wipe out my meat magazine. What's happened hyer since we went away?"

If Rough Rob had been looking closely, he might have seen Danger Doll start slightly at the abrupt question.

Nevertheless, she came in and stood at the table, at which he had seated himself on a three-legged stool, and was ravenously attacking a chunk of meat.

"Nothing of note has occurred," she said, avoiding his gaze.

"Whar's thet prophet ov evil?"

"Parson Paul?"

"Yes."

"Gone away."

"For good?"

"Perhaps."

"He'd better keep his distance. I lay half ov our bad success at Blue Blazes to him. Curse his prophecies, anyhow! Is Idaho Will back?"

"Yes."

"With his runaway hoss?"

"Yes."

This seemed unwelcome intelligence to Rough Rob, and for several minutes he was silent.

All at once he left the bone he was picking and, straightening suddenly, looked Danger Doll squarely in the face.

"You know what I told you the other night?" he said.

"About the boy?"

"Yes. You've got to make Ruby shake him, or I shake you forever. You haven't forgotten that I said this?"

"No."

"Well, what have you done about it since I left?"

"Nothing yet—"

"Which means that you're not disposed to hurry the matter up, eh?"

"Give me time."

"Time?" almost thundered Rough Rob. "Do you want a year? See hyer! That boy has been a curse to Camp Dynamite ever since he set foot in it. I don't like a hair ov him, never did, an' by heavens! this night settles it forever 'twixt us. You won't make Ruby shake him, tharfore, Danger Doll, our trails separate from this spot."

One would have thought that at this announcement the woman would have remonstrated and begged the bully of Dynamite to reconsider his resolve, but she was made of sterner stuff than that.

Instead of cringing at his feet, she seemed to increase in stature, and her answer was an unexpected laugh.

"Very well," she said. "Suit yourself about it. I'm quite content. If our paths diverge here let them do so at once. Never ask Danger Doll to stand longer by the man whose life she once saved at the risk of her own. Come to me in the day of danger and trouble, Rough Rob, and get spurned, if nothing more, for your pains. The boy you hate is quite able to take care of himself, even in Camp Dynamite. One of these days he'll be your equal."

"Thet young whelp?"

"Yes, Idaho Will."

"I can crush him as I'd crush an egg-shell," laughed the Dynamiter brutally. "You'll make him your pard now, I suppose?"

"Never! I don't like him. I actually hate the boy you fetched into camp one night an'

told me that you found him freezing at a camp-fire that had nearly burned down. There's no danger of me taking up with him now. So we part?"

"You won't get Ruby Rose to give him the bounce?"

"What's the use? Haven't I told you a hundred times that she should never become his wife?"

"But you let them go on makin' love in spite of yer promise," snapped the Regulator.

Danger Doll did not speak, but stepped across the sill and reached the cool air outside.

"Good-by, Rough Rob," she said.

"Good-by, Monte Maud! I give you back the name I found you with."

The name made the woman's eyes sparkle with rage, and for a moment she seemed about to go back to the desperado with the mien of an insulted tigress.

"Thank you," she said, with savage sarcasm. "I'll take my old name back, and in the future give my enemies cause to remember it. 'Good-by, Monte Maud, eh? Until we meet again, farewell, hangman of the gold placers!'"

She stepped further from the door and vanished, leaving Rough Rob alone and considerable nonplused.

"If she leaves Dynamite she will take the girl with her," he suddenly exclaimed. "That must never be! 'Monte Maud' stung her to the quick, didn't it? She well knows that there are a thousand men in Idaho who hev'n't forgot the handbills which fifteen years ago offered a big reward for her. She sha'n't leave camp with the girl. Ruby Rose is worth her weight in gold to some, but I wouldn't let her slip away for all the wealth hidden in these hills. She's too pretty for all that."

Five minutes later the Regulator of Camp Dynamite halted in front of Danger Doll's shanty, and tried the door gently with his bronzed hand.

Much to his astonishment it yielded and he listened there with his head half-inside the cabin.

Not a sound rewarded him, nothing to indicate in the slightest degree that the place was inhabited.

Had Danger Doll already decamped?

"What! am I too late?" he ejaculated. "Have both birds, the fledglin' especially, flown?"

He answered the question by stepping fearlessly into the cabin.

Dark as it was inside, it did not take Rough Rob long to discover the true state of affairs.

"Now for the other nest," he said, reappearing at the door. "This one doesn't contain a single bird; if the other's in the same fix, it will look like a conspiracy. Then, woe to you, Monte Maud!"

He started down the street of the mountain camp the picture of rage.

Nobody seemed to see him, and he did not halt until he reached a certain cabin the door of which he kicked open without ceremony.

"Whar's the bird that occupied this nest?" he exclaimed. "Show yerself, my chirper. I'm hyar on business."

"Then, I'll talk to you," said a voice that made the bully start. "Stand where you are, Rough Rob. I've got you between me and the stars, and my revolver covers your head. What business fetches you here?"

"Business of importance, Idaho," said the rough mellowing down somewhat, as he caught sight of the youth's outlines, and perhaps detected a gleam of the weapon leveled at his head. "I want ter know if you ever think ov capturin' Ruby Rose."

"That is my business," was the prompt answer. "Now, Rough Rob, say to me, truthfully, if you can, that my horse got out of the corral without the help of hands."

"Thet's the animile's business!" laughed the Regulator.

"And mine, too. For months you've shown your hatred of me in many mean ways, Rough Rob. I've stood it all meekly and swallowed all your insults. I have sworn not to put up with another one. Physically you are my superior; but in other ways I'm your equal."

"I'd like ter know in what way, baby," sneered the rough.

"With the weapon that I hold in my hand," was the answer. "You kicked my door in with mischief in your heart; you thought I had fled the camp because you came back from Blue Blazes fuming like a baffled lion. No, Rough Rob, I stand my ground. When I am wanted I'll be found here. This shall be my fighting-ground. Despite the difference in our sizes, you'll not find me the coward you expected to see in the Champions of the Silver Camp. Now,

sir, step across my threshold within two minutes, or I'll drive a bullet through your head!"

Rough Rob ground his teeth till they cracked, as it were, and his eyes darted forth lightning flashes of rage; but he did not resist the command.

Covered by the weapon of the resolute boy, he backed toward the door, and did not pause until he was on the outside once more.

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN THE HAT DROPS.

"ANY time that ruffian wants me, he will find me here," said Idaho Will, as Rough Rob walked off with clinched fists and swearing vengeance dire under his breath. "He came here to do some meanness, but, contrary to his expectations, he found me prepared for him. He's had an evil eye on both Ruby and I this long while, and now he's showing himself. Keep your distance, villain, or there'll be war to the knife between us."

These were brave words for the boy to give utterance to in the heart of Camp Dynamite after what had just happened.

He meant to stand by each one with a tenacity which might cost him a great deal before the mountain drama was played through to its close.

He had the open hatred of the Regulator bully against him; he already knew that Danger Doll bore him no good-will, and he had to keep an eye on Parson Paul, the youth he had severely and deservedly whipped.

Thus situated, Idaho Will was in a very unpleasant predicament.

He remained in his cabin after the Regulator's departure until the first quarter of the night had nearly waned.

Once more Camp Dynamite seemed at peace with the world.

The roughs who had tramped back from Blue Blazes tired and discomfited, were recuperating their wasted strength by refreshing slumber, and the quiet of the tomb had fallen upon the town.

Idaho Will stood at the half-open door of his little cabin half an hour before he ventured out.

"Something happened to irritate Rough Rob before he came here," he said. "Maybe he found Parson Paul, and failed to get the best of him. I'll go and see."

He left the shanty, well armed and full of quiet determination.

He did not know that the boy prophet had been taken to a cave by Danger Doll, there to remain until his swollen face healed, but believed that he still lurked somewhere in the camp.

He got a few yards from the cabin when he stopped and instinctively laid his hand on his revolver.

"None o' thet, boy," said a voice and a noiseless stride carried to his side the figure that had risen in his path.

Idaho Will almost uttered an ejaculation of amazement.

Champion Dick or somebody who answered the description given by Ruby Rose of the most daring of the two brothers had come back to Dynamite!

Idaho Will felt the giant's hand on his arm and found himself looking up into his face.

"Whar's Ruby?" was the question that struck the boy's ears.

"In her cabin, isn't she?" he said.

"No; I've been thar; it's empty. Even Danger Doll isn't thar."

A strange fear took sudden possession of the boy's heart.

"Don't you know whar she is?" continued the Champion. "You're the pard she told us about—you're Idaho Will, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"An' you don't know whar Ruby is?"

"I do not."

A moment's silence followed the reply.

"Then, whar's the boss wildcat ov this camp?"

"Rough Rob?"

"Yes."

"If you stir him up to-night you'll have all against you," said Idaho Will remonstratively.

"Thet much bigger will be the picnic," was the quick answer in eager and fearless tones. "If I can't find Danger Doll or Ruby, I kin find ther Regulator, mebbe."

Idaho Will looked the speaker over from head to foot, before he spoke again.

He would like to see Rough Rob meet his match physically, and in Champion Dick the boy believed that the Regulator would find his equal.

"I'll show you his shanty, if you are bound to see him," he said.

"That's what I'm hyer for."

"Are you alone?"

"Why not?" and Champion Dick laughed. "Must a man be afraid to come alone to Dynamite when he comes on business?"

The boy had already turned away, and therefore did not reply.

"Hold!" suddenly said the Champion, laying his hand on Idaho's arm. "Has Parson Paul come back to camp?"

"I do not know—did he leave it?"

"Yes. Thet boy came hyer on other business than ter prophesy. He came all ther way from Californy."

Idaho Will showed his astonishment in his look.

"What fetched him here?"

"I don't exactly know, but it warn't ter prophesy. Did you ever hear that Danger Doll had another name?"

"No."

"All right," said Champion Dick, in a mysterious manner. "Ain't we pretty close to Rough Rob's sanctum?"

"We are here now."

The soft and brilliant starlight fell upon the cabin to which Idaho Will pointed as he finished, and the well-oiled lock of the Champion's revolver clicked as he raised it from his side.

"Maybe he's tired from his tramp back, but no difference. What I couldn't get out ov the woman I may be able to worm out ov him."

What did the man from Blue Blazes mean?

He stepped to the door of the shanty, or cabin, and without hesitating a moment struck it several raps with his clinched left hand.

Idaho Will stepped back where the shadows were deepest, and waited, holding his breath.

He could not but admire the man who, alone and without fear, had come back to Camp Dynamite, where he knew the hands of forty wild men were against him.

There was something heroically daring in Champion Dick's return, and the boy wondered what could be at the bottom of it all.

The raps died away without response, the door of Rough Rob's cabin did not open.

"Not at home, or sound asleep," murmured Dick, as he stepped back toward the boy.

"Wide awake, devil from Blue Blazes! Throw up your hands, or I'll bore yer skull!"

These words fell like a thunderbolt on the ears of the twain in the shadow of Rough Rob's cabin.

They came from the tongue of a man who stood at a corner of the hut, but only a few feet away, and with two revolvers covered Champion Dick!

Idaho Will recognized the voice before he caught sight of its owner.

"It is Rough Rob himself!" he whispered at Dick's side. "Mercy never knew that man!"

A second's silence followed the boy's words.

"What is it to be, Champion Dick?—hands up, er death?" continued the Dynamite bully.

"Wanted ter see me, eh?"

"Yes, I want ter see you," said the Champion coolly.

"But not with yer hands whar they ar' just now," was the prompt reply. "Up they go above yer head, er they stiffen at yer sides at sunrise! Hands up er die, cherub ov the cowards' camp!"

What would the Champion do?

Idaho Will watched him with increasing curiosity.

He heard his teeth grate after the command and the epithet.

All at once up went the bronze hands of Champion Dick, and Rough Rob took a stride forward.

"What you hev ter say ter me you'll say before ther hull camp," he said maliciously. "You're a fool ter come back hyer under the circumstances. Ten men good an' true ter Dynamite died when we went down ter Blue Blazes. Forty men ar' hyer ready ter take vengeance. I'll call the pards out," and there rose from the Regulator's throat a yell loud enough to waken the soundest sleeper in camp.

Champion Dick, still holding his hands above his head, looked into Rough Rob's triumphant visage just behind the heavy revolvers and waited for the ruffians of Dynamite.

Idaho Will stepped back without noise and unperceived, and watching his opportunity, as he thought, slipped away, and was gone in an instant!

The Regulator's rousing cry had the desired effect, for it had hardly ceased to echo among the cabins when doors were dashed open, and dark-shirted men armed in a moment, leaped into the starlight.

"This way," cried the king of the camp. "I've caught a prize worth ter us his weight in dust!"

Guided by their leader's voice the men of Dynamite came forward, and found the two men face to face, Champion Dick still covered by the deadly revolvers of the Regulator.

The scene almost took their breath.

"Drop yer hands now," said the Regulator to his prisoner, when more than twenty revolvers besides his had been leveled at him. "Boys, this is one ov the batteries thet opened on us when we went ter Blue Blazes," he continued addressing his pards.

How the eyes of the Dynamiters flashed.

"Say the word, cap'n, an' we'll make a sieve out ov him!" was the response. "Death to the galoot thet represents Blue Blazes!"

By this time this striking tableau had been fully and vividly revealed by several torches.

The roughs of the mountain den saw the stalwart figure and handsome features of Champion Dick as he looked into their revolvers without a sign of fear in the depths of his eyes.

Six feet tall in his boots, and built like a giant, he looked the very essence of courage and of western manhood.

"We don't mince matters hyer," suddenly said Rough Bob, looking the prisoner sternly in the eye, which did not quail. "You came ter Dynamite ter talk business with me, you say. Begin! We're all pards hyer; one man's affairs b'long ter all." And the Regulator waved his hand toward the men who flanked him.

Champion Dick swept with a glance the dark faces and glittering eyes behind the leveled six-shooters.

"I'll postpone my business," he said coolly.

"Forever?"

"No; until we ar' alone, Rough Rob."

The Regulator and half of his men burst into a derisive laugh.

"Fool!" Rough Rob exclaimed. "Do you think that time will ever come? Do you expect to walk unharmed from Dynamite as you've done afore? We ar' still sprinkled with the blood ov the pards thet dropped at yer droppers' muzzles. The end ov yer trail, Champion Dick, has been reached. Wildcats ov Dynamite, look at that man. When I drop my hat bore him through an' through!"

Rough Rob held up his sombrero.

It was a thrilling moment.

CHAPTER X.

CHAMPION DAN ON DECK.

STANDING with folded arms on a spot not twenty yards from the scene just described, and with a pair of flashing eyes fastened on Champion Dick and his bronzed executioners, was a woman.

"I'll let 'em go on, as they'll take vengeance out of my hands," she said in half audible tones. "Champion Dick, in coming back to Camp Dynamite, you've fallen into the trap that never spares a victim. Rough Rob means to have you shot to pieces as certain as fate. When he drops his sombrero, the trail of one of the mountain brothers will end, and you will never more hunt me for Monte Maud."

Need we name this woman now?

If Danger Doll had taken Ruby Rose beyond the Regulator's clutches, she had returned to camp and in time to see Champion Dick in the tightest snap of his life.

And she did not care; she would not lift a hand to save the man from Blue Blazes.

Not she!

"Shoot him down!" she went on impatiently as the seconds flitted by. "Why don't you drop your hat, Rough Rob? Are you waiting for a rescue? Well, I sha'n't save him."

Dick's back was turned toward the woman, therefore she could see the countenances of the toughs of Dynamite, but not his.

The torches burning in her face and with no light ahead of the executioners, she could not see the object which had suddenly lighted the Champion's eyes with a singular gleam.

He saw something no one else saw, and he was counting the seconds with the same eagerness that characterized the woman behind him.

Suddenly the sharp crack of a repeating rifle broke the stillness in which the Dynamiters were waiting for the death signal, and Rough Rob's sombrero leaped from his hand!

"Heavens! who did that?" vociferated the desperado whirling about with more than half his men. "Whose weapon speaks for the coward of Blue Blazes?"

"Mine does!" came the prompt answer from a spot a few feet away. "The best rifle in Idaho kivers the captain ov the Dynamite roughs!"

Drop yer revolvers, galoots of the Rockies, or I'll bore yer leader through!"

From more than one tongue and in concert, too, fell the name of the speaker:

"Champion Dan!"

Yes, erect in the torchlight, with the deadly rifle at his shoulder and his keen eye flashing along the polished barrel, stood the second brother of Blue Blazes, the counterpart in stature and looks of the one lately covered by forty revolvers!

Rough Rob seemed to recoil a foot at sight of him.

"No words, no excuses!" continued Champion Dan in the same stern tones. "That man goes free this moment, or the work begun at Blue Blazes will go on hyer. Walk out ov the trap, Dick, an' the first hand thet goes up for ye, seals the captain's doom!"

This was the man suddenly caught sight of by the menaced Champion behind the rank that confronted him, and it was for him he waited while the hat hung between Rough Rob's fingers.

"Let 'im be blamed quick about it!" growled the Regulator. "This can't happen more than once in Dyaamite."

"Once may be enough," was the reply. "Rough Rob, you held yer hat too long."

The Regulator made no reply, but bit his lips, and glanced at his cowed pards.

"Good-night, captain," said Champion Dick. "Thet question I wanted ter ask ye I'll postpone for awhile. 'Pon honor, I wasn't lookin' for Dan, but he's ther blamedest galoot ter turn up when he's wanted I ever saw. Good-night, daisy pards ov Dynamite. Whatever happens, remember thet ther honor ov Blue Blazes hes ter be maintained at all hazards."

The furious pards of the mountain camp had to see the Champion depart without lifting a revolver against him.

Champion Dan never stirred an inch, but kept his rifle leveled on Rough Rob who formed a magnificent target in the glare of the torches.

Dick whirled on his heel with his last word, and walked toward the spot where Danger Doll had lately stood.

If she had kept her station she could have touched him as he came forward, but she had disappeared, and was not there to greet him.

He seemed to know where to join his brother for he walked rapidly away after leaving the light and turned suddenly between two shanties.

"Just as I expected, Dan's found my horse," he exclaimed as he came abruptly upon two horses saddled and bridled, horses as near alike as the brothers themselves. "You came on the ground in the nick of time to-night, pard. I thought I had slipped out ov Blue Blazes without you knowin' it, but I didn't play it slick enough for you, Dan."

He went up to one of the horses which recognized him and then turned his face toward a glare of light some distance ahead and waited.

Three minutes later he heard a footstep at sound of which he lifted his revolver and leaned forward half shielded by the body of the horse.

"It's Dan!" he exclaimed as a figure came in sight and the following moment the Twin Champions had grasped hands.

"I did what I oughtn't ter hev done. I spared Rough Rob," said Dan regretfully.

"Thanks," was the reply. "I want some information he has, an' dead he couldn't let me hev it. It war the eleventh hour, Dan, but you got thar."

"When did I ever fail?"

"Never!"

The eyes of Champion Dick beamed proudly as he spoke; he was prohd of his giant brother.

"Did you see Ruby Rose to-night?" asked Dan quickly.

"No; the nest is empty."

"Who told you?"

"Idaho Will, the girl's pard."

"An' ther woman?"

"I didn't meet her this trip. If the girl is gone, it proves one thing—that I hit her hard when I called her Monte Maud. Look hyer, Dan. We've stirred up the tigers ag'in an' in the home den at that. Have you a watch?"

Champion Dan caught the full meaning of the interrogative in a flash.

"No," he said laying his hand on Dick's arm. "It won't do now."

"Ruby is gone; it won't burn her out. She shall never come back to Dynamite. Give me the watch!"

But Champion Dan shook his head.

"We'll light this camp later," he said. "I haven't forgotten that it's war to the knife 'twixt Dynamite an' Blue Blazes; but we've got more

ter do than ter burn shanties. If we're on the right trail, as you think we ar', we can't stop ter burn mountain camps."

"Right you ar', Dan!" cried Dick. "I'll leave Dynamite for another time, but one ov these times I'll paint heaven red with its burnin'. Blue Blazes ag'in' all creation! Come!"

He turned to his horse as he finished, and with his brother sprung to saddle.

"Now for Ruby's trail," he exclaimed.

"Not while I can prevent!" was the hissed response from a spot a short distance to the right. "Here I succeed where Rough Rob and his fierce pards failed!"

The succeeding second was broken by a flash and a report, and if Dan had not thrown one arm about Champion Dick, he would have fallen from his horse.

"Well, Champions of Blue Blazes, you've found me at last. Now go and find Ruby Rose!" shouted the shooter.

"Danger Doll!" ejaculated Dan.

"No; Monte Maud!" grated Dick.

"Ride out of this nest of mountain eagles. I'll live to clip the wings of all!"

Dan swore and urged the horses forward.

"I'll help you do it, Dick!" he flashed.

As for Danger Doll, she watched the two men vanish which they did in a moment, and then turned away holding the revolver in her hand.

"One of them only, but I'll get the other one in time," she murmured. "Yes, I am Monte Maud, and the prize I got in California I'm not going to relinquish in Idaho!"

She had not advanced far when she was halted by the flash of a torch, and from the corner of the nearest shanty she saw the captain of the Dynamite toughs and twenty of his pards.

"There's a bloody trail down yonder, Rough Rob," she went on, glancing toward the spot she had just vacated. "Go and follow it with your human tigers, or turn and hunt me—I care not which! I'm willing to play the game through with the hand you see fit to give me. No man ever yet got the best of Monte Maud!"

CHAPTER XI.

CAUGHT AT THE THROAT.

THE shot fired by the Queen of Dynamite mystified the brawny Regulator and his followers.

They finally came to the conclusion that it had been delivered in a spirit of defiance by the two brothers previous to riding from the spot, where, but for Champion Dan's timely interference, Dick would have lost his life.

Rough Rob, therefore, led his men back in no enviable frame of mind.

He had much to growl over.

He had been driven from Idaho Will's cabin at the muzzle of a deadly weapon, Danger Doll had broken with him, and Ruby Rose was not to be found.

To say the least, the Regulator was furious.

He said nothing as he marched back toward the scene of Champion Dick's rescue, but every one of his followers saw that his brain was busy.

At the first opportunity he left his pards and skipped off to his own cabin.

"Confound it! let the twin pards go for the present," he growled, still in the same unenviable mood. "Dynamite will come out on top in the end anyhow. I want ter know what's become ov the girl. Somewhar along the line that infernal young prophet has got his hand in the matter. He didn't come all ther way from California just ter tell dynamite thet lie about its impendin' destruction. An' what made Danger Doll take up with him ther moment she sot eyes on ther youngster? I'll get at the bottom ov this mystery ef I hev ter choke it out ov somebody!"

Five minutes after the conclusion of this speech Rough Rob might have been seen listening at the door of Idaho Will's cabin.

His manner was determined, and he had changed his tactics since, on his previous visit, he had kicked the door in to find the occupant of the shanty ready for him.

Now he held his ear at the door, and was listening intently.

But Rough Rob was not rewarded by the breaths of a sleeper, and he straightened up somewhat disappointed.

"He's a hard sleeper, but he isn't thar," he said in audible tones as he walked away. "Wal, I'll see him later." And he thrust into his belt the revolver he carried in his hand.

At that moment Idaho Will was not in Camp Dynamite, and if Rough Rob had been blessed with superior vision, he might have seen him

moving over a mountain-trail not very far behind a female figure that glided on unconscious of the person on her trail.

To be brief and explanatory, Idaho Will had followed Danger Doll from Dynamite, and he was hoping that he was approaching the spot where Ruby was.

While he thought at times that blood ties did not really bind the twain together, he had been forced to drop investigation at the very starting-point, for even Ruby told him that she had never known any parent but Rough Rob's female pard, and he knew nothing about the woman dying in Sacramento City fifteen years prior to the opening of our story, and nothing about Danger Doll's previous career.

The Queen of Dynamite, a title which Doll had given herself, led the boy two miles from camp, and suddenly disappeared in an opening which at once proclaimed itself the mouth of a cave.

"Aha! I am in luck!" fell from his tongue as he hastened forward. "Danger Doll didn't lead me such a long chase after all." And in he went, but not until he had prepared himself for an emergency by cocking a revolver.

Idaho Will expected to find the young girl in the cavern, but he was suddenly disappointed, for the voice he heard and the figure he saw greatly startled him.

In the light of a torch which partly illumined a chamber of rather pretentious dimensions, he saw Parson Paul, the youth he had lately chastised for his insolence in Camp Dynamite.

The greeting between Danger Doll and the boy prophet was cordial, and Idaho Will saw that the latter had recovered from his hurts and looked himself again.

Ruby was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm ready to go back now!" exclaimed Parson Paul as he faced the woman and looked into her face with eagerness. "I'm ready to meet Ruby Rose, and to pay that young galoot back for the work of his fists."

The young listener could not repress a smile.

"All right!" he murmured. "Whenever you want to meet me, Parson Paul, you will find me ready."

"Why not go back now?" Paul continued, as Danger Doll made no reply to his hot words. "You said I should meet Ruby Rose when my bruises had healed. They're all well now. Why delay the introduction?"

"Have I intimated that I am going to?" she asked.

"No; but—"

"Then wait till I try to put you off," was the interruption in no good voice. "I came here to talk business with you. You tell me that you have a key to a vein of gold that exists somewhere among the mountains."

"I have."

"And I possess the prettiest prize ever found among the Rockies."

"I'll admit that. Go on."

"Now promise me that the key shall be explained to me, and I will turn over to you the diamond of Idaho—Ruby Rose, my daughter."

Idaho Will was prepared for almost anything, but hardly for this piece of infamy.

He was on the eve of throwing himself into the presence of the pair, and telling Danger Doll that to her proposition he said "No."

It was with superhuman effort that he held himself back.

Parson Paul's eyes glittered strangely at the woman's blunt proposition.

He took a step forward, and exclaimed:

"Do you mean that?"

"Try me," answered Danger Doll, quickly. "Ah! you do not know me, Parson Paul. I have broken forever with Rough Rob; we are two from this night. I have other ambitions than to be his pard, and to reign Queen of Dynamite, when with gold I can regain my old position in California. I must have a yellow vein, and a good one, too, at my command to do this. Of course I love Ruby Rose, but I know she will fare well in your hands. I am in a position that takes me often from her. Show me the vein of gold, or explain the key, and the most beautiful creature west of the Missouri is yours."

From where he stood hugging the dark wall of the stony corridor that ended at the underground chamber, Idaho Will saw the expression of Parson Paul's face.

The boy prophet seemed to have scored a great triumph, but all at once it underwent a change, and he said:

"In California, eh? You want to go back there and reinstate yourself?"

"Yes."

"In Sacramento?"

Idaho Will saw the woman start. The last shaft had struck home.

"What is it to you where I go to reinstate myself?" she cried.

"A good deal," answered Parson Paul, with a glitter in his eye. "Yes, a good deal, Monte Maud."

Danger Doll recoiled with an exclamation which she could not suppress.

She could not deny the appellation; by her action she had already condemned herself.

"Do you call me that?" she hissed as she went forward and halted within arm's reach of the boy prophet.

"I do, and I see that I hit the bull's eye, too," was the prompt response. "I don't see why I must give you the gold key for that which is not yours. Ruby Rose isn't your daughter, and you dare not stand there in the face of my accusation and say that she is."

Idaho Will startled by this revelation looked at the Queen of Dynamite.

What would she say?

"Very well," she said; "if you think you can get the girl by any other method, drive ahead. Whoever I am, and whatever I have been, she is mine to dispose of and woe to the man or boy who attempts to dispossess me without my consent."

The aspect of the mountain Jezebel was something terrible while she uttered these words.

With hand uplifted she stood before the uncowed youth, and hurled upon his head the lightnings of her threats.

"All right," said Parson Paul coolly. "We understand each other thoroughly, I guess. You are Monte Maud beyond doubt, and you are not Ruby's mother. We can yet make a trade if you listen to reason. I admit that Ruby belongs to you as much as to any other person."

"Certainly she does. You came from California not to prophesy, but to find her?"

Parson Paul's eyes gave Danger Doll an affirmative reply, even before his lips spoke.

"Well, I have found her, haven't I?" he laughed in a triumphant manner.

"And your preaching was all sham."

"Perhaps."

"You've played it well," said the woman.

"No better than I expected to when I started out. Look here. Say that you will not stand between me and Ruby, and I will give you a chance to get back to the position left behind when they hunted you out of the golden State."

"I can't trust you now," said the Queen of Dynamite. "Your story about the gold vein may be like your preaching—an infamous sham."

The youth's eyes flashed madly.

"Then, go back to California and fight for your old place," he exclaimed. "I'm quite able to take care of myself."

"Which means that you are determined to win the Sacramento Rose despite me, does it?"

"I shouldn't be surprised."

Parson Paul's look was defiance now.

"Then, my young fool, we'll open the battle right here."

Idaho Will was prepared for something startling and he was not disappointed.

All at once, with a tigerish spring which could not be resisted, Danger Doll, of Dynamite, threw herself upon the boy prophet and had him at the throat before he could lift a hand in self-defense, or before the single spectator could interfere.

It was the work of a second, sudden, swift, relentless.

"You will play a bold hand against me, will you?" cried the infuriated woman, as she bore him back, almost lifting him from the ground. "You will find yourself pitted against the genuine Monte Maud if you do, my false parson. You mustn't forget that while I have the best prize in Idaho to dispose of, I will either make my own terms or listen to none. Did you come all the way from California to be choked to death by my hands?"

The strength of Danger Doll seemed prodigious, and the boy, unable to resist, was already growing black in the face.

He could not cry aloud, for the fingers of the human tigress seemed to have met behind his windpipe.

For a minute or more Idaho Will stood spell-bound at the thrilling sight.

"God above! she shall not kill him!" he suddenly exclaimed. "I owe Parson Paul one for unmasking her to-night, and showing her up to me in her true character. Though that boy is my enemy and would take my life, I will render him a service."

He darted suddenly from his position, and with three bounds covered the distance between him and the Dynamite enchantress.

"That's enough of such work!" he thundered at her side as his hand fell heavily upon her arm, giving her thus startingly the first intimation of his presence. "Unhand Parson Paul and let him get his breath!"

"For you?" cried the woman, wheeling upon the interferer and recognizing him in an instant. "Release this young meddler at *your* command? Yes, I'll do it; but I'll transfer my clutch to your windpipe!"

Parson Paul dropped limp from her hands, and the next second she was rushing upon Idaho Will, her eyes two globes of flame, as it seemed, and her fingers ready for his throat.

But the youth sprang nimbly aside, and when the furious Jezebel turned to charge again, she found a revolver thrust into her face.

And back of the weapon Idaho Will laughed maliciously.

CHAPTER XII.

BURNED OUT.

It was the night after the occurrence of the events just narrated that two men, one of whom had a red bandage about his head, drew rein among the mountains not far from Camp Dynamite, and turning half-way around in their saddles, listened intently.

"Nothin' behind us; let's see what's ahead," said one of the riders significantly.

"All right, Dan; this time I hev matches ov my own," was the reply, and the twain rode on.

These two men were exactly alike, and if a Dynamiter had seen them at that moment he would have known them for the two Champions of Blue Blazes.

Despite the ugly wound inflicted by Danger Doll's revolver, Dick, was himself again, and his eye possessed a cruel gleam while he replied to his brother's words.

If nothing was behind them there was something ahead—Dynamite, and the forty men-tigers who lived there.

"They shed my blood in Dynamite," hissed Dick, leaning toward his brother when they found themselves near the camp. "When I ride out of the nest the mountain buzzards will have cause to hate me. We're goin' ter paint things red before mornin'."

"We'll hev ter hurry up, Dick; it doesn't want more'n an hour till day."

"Wal, we'll git thar."

Champion Dan was right when he said that morning was not more than an hour away.

The two brothers found the camp as quiet as a nest of sleeping doves, and their approach gave forth no sounds.

They rode almost to the very center of the camp where their lives would be forfeited in an instant if they were discovered.

"It looks kinder rough ter burn 'em out without warnin'," said Dan with a glance at his brother.

"No it don't!" was the merciless answer. "It's dog eat dog, an' we've got the bone now. Set this lot ov galoots down in Blue Blazes with matches in their pockets an' see what they'd do. I know that Monte Maud shot me, but she b'longs ter this nest. Let 'em match Blue Blazes ef they kin!"

Champion Dick slid from his horse and walked straight toward a cabin.

He knew it for Danger Doll's; he had seen it before.

Dan saw him listen at the door a moment, and then push it open, as if certain that it had no tenants.

Into the shanty went Dick and disappeared.

Dan with a revolver in each hand mounted guard ready to shoot the first living thing that appeared.

A strong wind from the west fanned the Champion's cheeks and played with his long black hair.

He waited five minutes for his brother's return.

At the end of that time Dick came out with a smile at the corners of his mouth.

"As they'd sarve Blue Blazes, so I sarve Camp Dynamite!" he said, halting beside his horse. "In less than twenty minutes this place will be doomed. I struck a match in Monte Maud's shanty. Ah! don't you hear the fire already?"

Dan did not reply, but wheeled suddenly and thrust his revolvers forward as if covering some one.

"I've got you," he said in a hiss to some person who had halted ten feet away. "Come

forward or I'll scatter yer brains to the winds. Forward! er die in yer tracks!"

The individual thus suddenly discovered advanced toward the champion's weapons.

"Heavens! Roarin' Rube from Blue Blazes," ejaculated Dan, lowering the revolvers the instant he made the discovery. Report. What's happened ter the city?"

"We've got no city," was the answer, at which the two champions started.

"What?"

"Thar ain't no Blue Blazes," said Rube.

"When war it done?"

"Just afore day, yesterday."

"Who did it?"

"Two devils from Dynamite."

"Did you git 'em?"

"Yes."

"Wal?"

"We threw 'em inter the fire!"

"War one Rough Rob?"

"No."

"Good! We'll settle with him. It war with his consent, though?"

"Ther galoots said it war."

Champion Dick threw a quick glance at the cabin in which he had kindled the fire of vengeance.

He seemed to see that his match was not going to fail him.

"Ar' you alone?" he asked the messenger.

"No. All the pards ar' back thar, just outside the camp."

"What made 'em all come?"

"Vengeance!"

"Just as ef Dan an' me warn't equal to the occasion," smiled Champion Dick. "We'll let Dynamite know that vengeance is as swift as an eagle, an' as terrible as Tartarus! Thank heaven! the wind is for Blue Blazes to-night. Look! the fire is leapin' out o' the roof. Come! we will hear the buzzards from the outskirts ov their nest."

The long tongues of flame that were shooting through the cabin roof here and there were beginning the work of destruction.

The three men eyed them for several minutes longer with unfeigned delight, and, headed by Champion Dick, turned away.

They went back over the same path that had witnessed the advance, and the two brothers drew rein at the foot of the mountain, and just beyond the camp.

In less than ten minutes the lurid light that shot heavenward proclaimed the bronzed incendiary's work.

Brighter and brighter it grew until the sky above got dark, and the flames cracked and roared as the wind twisted them like so many fiery serpents.

"Why don't the mountain buzzards stir? Their nest is burnin' up," said Dick impatiently.

It was time that the burning cabin had roused the roughs of Dynamite, for the men who listened on the outskirts of the camp heard pistol-shots and loud cries of danger.

Champion Dick's dark face lit up with enthusiasm, and his eyes glowed as he looked and listened.

It was an exciting moment even for the cool men of the mountain border.

The fire increased as cabin after cabin, dry as tinder, caught, and the winds that seemed to fight for Blue Blazes swept the fiery scourge along.

The toughs of the burning camp could not arrest the flames; a glance must have told them that the whole place was doomed.

Champion Dick and his comrades could not see the group of mad men who stood in the fire-light and with flaming eyes and clinched hands watched the onward rush of the destroying demon.

"Started in *her* cabin, eh?" cried Rough Rob to his pards. "Thet settles it. She broke with me the other night an' her eyes said she'd do suthin' desperate. Wal, I'm glad she's showed her colors. We know what to do now. With my hand at her throat, she'll wish she'd never changed her name from Monte Maud to Danger Doll."

The men from Blue Blazes did not hear these words, but thirty-seven mountain athletes did.

"Then you think it's her work, cap'n?" asked one of the men at the Regulator's back.

"Think? No! I know it! She gave herself away when she put the match to her own shanty. This fire makes us tigers, an' woe to the woman an' the men from the south! Hyer, swear with me to make 'em all suffer."

Up went more than a score of hands, when Champion Dick exclaimed:

"I heard a voice then, an' I'll see what's goin' on down thar!"

Away he went alone and a minute later drew rein in the firelit street, and in full view of the group about to swear eternal enmity against the foes of Dynamite.

"Gods! look yonder!" exclaimed the Dynamiter who whirled Rough Rob about and pointed toward the Champion. "Do you tell us now that this is Danger Doll's work?"

Champion Dick could not but laugh at the surprise and consternation caused by his sudden appearance.

He saw the Regulator recoil at sight of him.

"Honor to whom honor is due, as they say!" he cried in ringing tones. "Put the credit ov this fire whar it belongs. I struck the match that doomed yer buzzard nest. Blue Blazes ag'in' Dynamite an' the world!"

Twenty revolvers clicked as the desperado finished.

Rough Rob himself started forward.

"You, Champion Dick?" he yelled. "Then take the compliments ov Rough Rob an' death!"

A sharp report followed, but not from the Regulator's weapon.

Champion Dick had fired first, and the giant who staggered back among his men had a broken arm.

CHAPTER XIII.

PARSON PAUL SHOTS.

"LET'im go! I'll see him later!" grated Rough Rob as he glared at the representative of Blue Blazes who had got the best of him and fired first.

Champion Dick had already turned away, and with his two companions, his brother and Roaring Rube the messenger, had disappeared.

All at once he came face to face with a crowd of dark-faced fellows who demanded, in no gentle language, to be led upon the burning camp.

But Champion Dick resolutely shook his head.

"'Twould be givin' the Dynamiter wildcats an advantage that might prove disastrous to you all," he said. "They'd fight in the light ov their shanties an' desperately, too. No. We must get away from hyer. The time will come when we'll fight it out an' settle forever all our scores. Come!"

The disappointed 'pard' followed him doggedly, and in very bad humor.

They had come up from destroyed Blue Blazes for vengeance; they had sworn to clean Dynamite out, and to give no quarter; but here they were marching from their intended battleground without having struck a single blow.

Morning came and showed more than one man the pall of black smoke that hung over the spot where Camp Dynamite had stood.

Had stood, we have written, for not one cabin had escaped the fury of the wind-swept flames, and smoking ruins marked the site of the ruffians' retreat.

From a certain spot a few miles from the scene a number of men watched this smoky canopy from their saddles.

They were the pards of Blue Blazes, men who knew what it was to be burned out by their enemies.

We need not inform the reader that many an eye glittered with delight while they looked.

Neither Champion Dick nor Champion Dan were in this group of mountain-men.

The two brothers had ridden off just before the day burst over crag and valley, and while their comrades watched the smoke, they were some distance from the spot leading their steeds over a rough and narrow trail that seemed to grow worse as a path as they proceeded.

Nearly one hundred feet above their heads ran in the same direction a similar trail, and if the keen eyes of the Twin Champions had glanced up they might have noticed the person who glided along this path with his eyes riveted upon them.

"You seek the same prize I want," murmured this individual while he watched the Champions. "You may know where she is, therefore, I'll keep you in sight; but you shall not get the prize even if you find it. I hate that she devil who almost choked the life out of me! I feel her fingers at my throat even now, though the boy called Idaho Will tore them loose. At the first opportunity I will rid the world of Monte Maud and Danger Doll, both at the same time! I came from the land of gold for the woman's ward, and the moment I heard of Danger Doll and Ruby Rose, I felt that I had found the prize. The boy is my enemy, if he did save my life. But I can outwit him. Parson Paul! against the world—Parson Paul! ha! ha!" and the speaker laughed heartily at the sound of the name.

The boy prophet continued to watch the

Champion brothers with the eye of the hawk, and when they stopped at last and cocked their revolvers, he instinctively threw an inquisitive glance ahead.

"Monte Maud!" fell from his lips. "Now I will see a circus, and when the time comes I'll show my hand."

Coming straight toward the Champions and entirely unconscious of their proximity, was the Jezebel of Camp Dynamite.

She was afoot, but walked erect over the trail rough as it was, and approached the two men quite rapidly.

There happened to be a natural alcove in the mountain wall at the very spot from which Champion Dick first espied the woman, and the brothers lost no time in availing themselves of it.

Parson Paul looked down on this scene with watchful eye.

"Oh, for a lasso with one hundred feet behind the noose!" he exclaimed. "I'd jerk Monte Maud out of the Champions' clutches when they thought they had her safe. I'd show them that I can do more than prophesy of evil to come. Ha! I didn't miss it far. Where is Dynamite to-day?"

Nearer and nearer to the twin pards came Danger Doll.

Was she going back to Camp Dynamite?

Suddenly Champion Dick sprang into the trail from the niche and as his "halt!" rung out clear and distinct, the Idaho enchantress recoiled with a startling cry.

"Some people will run ag'in' a revolver!" ejaculated the bronzed Champion, a twinkle of rough humor in his eyes. "Look hyer, Monte Maud: war yer shanty insured?"

"What do you mean?" was the reply, and the woman threw a quick look over the man's shoulders.

"What I've just said. Thar's no Dynamite ter speak ov just now."

"Ah! that is the meaning of the dark smoke hanging over the mountain down yonder?"

"Yes."

"Did you men do it?"

"I hev thet distinguished honor; but the joke ov it is thet they laid it to you."

"Who did?" flashed Danger Doll.

"Thet chromo pard ov yourn—Rough Rob."

The woman's eyes suddenly blazed.

"Never mind; I corrected the impression," laughed the Champion. "I told him who war ter be credited for the burnin' afore I gave him my compliments in lead."

"Did you kill Rough Rob?" cried the woman, quickly.

"Only winged he is—shot in the arm."

"And they let you get away?"

"Yes."

"That's more than I would have done!"

"It warn't your fault that I got off so well when you fired the other night," said Dick, as his brow darkened.

The woman did not reply, but looked at the speaker defiance and eternal hatred.

"Goin' back to Dynamite from whar ye've stowed the girl away, I suppose?" continued Dick, leaning forward with eagerness as he spoke. "You will oblige us, Monte Maud, if ye'll just turn about an' go back over yer trail to Ruby Rose."

Still the lips of the scheming woman did not move.

She stood in front of the two men like an insulted queen, more than comely with her fine figure, flashing eyes and mass of unconfined tresses—a tigress in human mold.

Her eyes said: "Me go back for you men? You mistake me!"

Her very attitude told the two brothers that they had caught her on the trail that led from Ruby's hiding-place, and it might have told them, as well, had they interpreted it correctly, that she had resolved to keep the secret of its location.

"Won't you act with some sense?" suddenly cried Champion Dan. "We are goin' ter hev thet girl ef it takes ther best blood in Idaho. We happen ter know who she is."

"Very well," said Danger Doll, taking no notice of the last sentence. "If you find her, you can have her."

There was a challenge illy concealed among the last words.

"Come! you know what's good for you!" cried Dick, advancing toward the woman, and seeing not the revolver which suddenly covered him from the trail overhead. "Dan told the truth when he spoke a minute ago. Conduct us to the trail, or—"

"Or what?" interrupted the woman. "What will you do if I refuse to obey you?"

"By Heavens! we'll leave you here, with a lasso for company!"

"And by that, lose the girl forever!" laughed Danger Doll. "All right, pards of Blue Blazes. Monte Maud turns back for no living man."

The two brothers exchanged swift glances.

"Is thet final?" asked Dick.

"Yes."

"Then we'll hunt Ruby, without you to follow like a hyena. We ar' more than the Champions ov Blue Blazes; we've been huntin' the babe stolen from its dead mother's arms fifteen years ago, in Sacramento, by Monte Maud—by you!"

"Well, what if I did?" was the defiant retort.

"You don't deny it now?" exclaimed Dan.

"No; what's the use? Danger Doll of Dynamite is Monte Maud of Sacramento. The child is your niece, men of Blue Blazes; but where is she? Ah! it may be a never-ending trail 'twixt this and her."

There was triumph in the woman's voice, victory in her blazing eyes!

"Never-endin'?" echoed Champion Dick.

"By the eternal, no!"

A sudden bound carried him to where the Jezebel of the Rockies had firmly planted herself and his hand clutched her arm before she could move.

"About face!" he shouted. "Back to the place where you hev hidden our sister's child! Back! or keep a lasso company where we stand!"

"But I have said *never*!" was the retort.

"All right! The lasso; quick, Dan!"

Champion Dan turned back toward his steed, from whose saddle hung a black lasso.

"I'll take a hand in the game at this juncture: it's getting interesting," said the youth, lying over the trail above with a revolver in each hand. "That woman nearly choked me to death once; but the pards of Blue Blazes sha'n't keep me from Ruby by hanging her!"

Dan had reached the horse and was uncoiling the lasso.

"Drop arm and lasso!" suddenly rung out the voice of Parson Paul from his elevated vantage ground. "I've taken a hand in this game."

The bronze pards looked up and Dan was the first to speak.

"I drop nothin'!" he thundered, and jerking the lasso loose he turned toward his brother with its coils dangling from his hand.

"Then die as the fool dies!" preceded the revolver-shot that started the echoes of the roughened pass, and Champion Dan dropped the lasso to reel against the wall with blood streaming over his lips!

Champion Dick sprang back with a thunderous oath, and straightening in the middle of the trail looked madly up at the boy prophet.

There was no second shot, and when he turned toward Monte Maud she was gone!

"I didn't think that boy would give me this in return for the choking I administered the other night," said the woman who halted a few rods from the scene of Parson Paul's sudden interference. "He is in terrible earnest, and bound to win Ruby at all hazards. If we could patch up a peace now I'd help him, for if he had not interfered, those devil-brothers would have carried out their threat; they would have hanged me with the lasso."

She moved still further away, and thirty minutes later came almost suddenly upon Parson Paul where she least expected to encounter him.

"Be there peace between us!" said Danger Doll as she went forward. "I owe you much for your timely shot. We will not be enemies now. You've paid in full for the prize you seek."

The boy eyed her closely.

CHAPTER XIV.

FROM PERIL TO PERIL.

PARSON PAUL had a right to eye the mountain enchantress suspiciously.

He had not forgotten the terrible choking received at her hands in the cavern where Idaho Will interfered in time to save his life.

It is true that he had just done her a service, but, for all that, knowing her ambitious and treacherous nature, she needed watching by him.

"Very well," he said to her. "Show me the girl, and we will not be enemies unless you say so."

"Come along, then. Ruby is not so far away that we cannot reach her in a short time."

A few minutes later Parson Paul had some of

his suspicions disarmed by being ushered into a cavern whose mouth was admirably concealed by a lot of vines and introduced to a beautiful young girl who came forward to meet him.

He saw that the fair creature's countenance fell as they met; she glanced at Danger Doll disappointedly.

"I see," said the boy prophet to himself. "She thought at first sight that I was Idaho Will. Have I yet to vanquish that youngster before I win this game?"

"This young man just saved my life," the enchantress said to Ruby.

"Who menaced it?"

"Who but the ruffian pards of Blue Blazes," answered Danger Doll her eyes flashing suddenly again. "His revolver spoke in the nick of time."

The girl uttered a startling cry.

"Who fell when he shot?" she asked.

"One of the pards."

"Dick?"

"I don't know which one; they're exactly alike to me."

"Do you know?" Ruby said turning to the youth.

"No."

"What difference does it make?" cried Danger Doll. "They are my enemies, and yours too, Ruby."

The girl made no reply to these words, but walked away.

"Never mind her manner," said the mountain Jezebel to Parson Paul a short time later. "Somehow or other, she's taken strangely to those two men from Blue Blazes, and yet she doesn't dream of the relationship that exists between them. Time will tame her and get her over that foolish thing."

"I didn't expect to get along smoothly at first. She's prettier than I expected to find her."

"Her mother was a beauty," said Danger Doll, with a glance toward that portion of the underground retreat to which Ruby Rose had retired. "She doesn't resemble her big uncles in the least. I wonder which one you did kill, Paul?"

"I cannot say. Stand them together and I could not tell them apart," answered the youth with a smile. "The other one will turn up before we've played the game through and then we'll settle with him."

The day wore slowly away, and its close found Parson Paul still an occupant of the cave in which he had met Ruby.

The fair girl had fought shy of him from the first moment of their meeting.

She seemed to know that he had come from California for her, that he had laid his plans to entrap her; but what surprised her was the singular partnership that existed between Danger Doll and the youth.

The Queen of Dynamite had taken her from the village under the plea that, as she had "broken" with Rough Rob, the Regulator might do her harm.

This was plausible.

Rough Rob was revengeful and a man with few scruples; he was willing to stoop to anything.

Ruby Rose looked upon Parson Paul as an evil genius who had crossed her path, and she secretly resolved that she would not abandon Idaho Will who had been her friend through thick and thin for him; in other words, she would not desert one who loved her for one whom she could not love.

If she did not know that the two big pards of Blue Blazes were her uncles, she respected them just the same.

Their bearing and bravery had won her admiration, and a pang shot through her heart when Danger Doll told her that Parson Paul's revolver had laid one low in death.

If this should turn out to be correct, woe to the young Californian if he should fall into the clutches of the surviving brother!

"I do not help matters by remaining here," she said to herself after daylight had faded again.

"I see plainly that Danger Doll and the boy have become friends. From the persecutions of the one I cannot fly to the other. They tell me that Camp Dynamite is in ashes and that Rough Rob is badly wounded. I have friends though, two at least—Idaho Will, and the unshot pard of Blue Blazes. But where are they?"

This was a question that puzzled and perplexed the beautiful girl.

"Why might I not find them?" she continued.

"I am not wholly unacquainted with the mountain trails of this country. The brother will not be driven from this region by the death of his pard; he will stay here for revenge. And Idaho Will will naturally drift to him, for Rough Rob

is against him, and at his command all Dynamite will raise their hands to smite him. I am menaced here; the woman whom I have been taught to call mother is against me. Heaven help me; I must leave this place."

There seemed nothing else for the rose of Camp Dynamite to do.

She had resolved to fly from the clutches of Danger Doll and Parson Paul to the trails and their perils that lay beyond the underground cavern.

Hour after hour she watched her opportunity. She feigned sleep so well that even the keen eyes and sharp ears of Danger Doll were completely deceived.

Parson Paul, dreaming of better success on the morrow with his wild courtship, had already thrown himself on the ground.

Ruby watched the woman furtively until sleep sealed her lids and then crept toward the corridor leading to the trail without.

She did not take new breath until once more under the stars she felt the winds of night on her cheeks.

Danger Doll had been unmasked there was no motherly affection in her bosom.

For one brief moment Ruby Rose stood in front of the cave and gathered strength for the adventures before her.

"The bird you have let escape will not go back to the cage of her own accord," she said with a smile and a glance toward the cavern. "If you are my mother, Danger Doll, I owe nothing but unhappiness to you. As for you, Parson Paul, as they call you, if I am the prize for which you are playing, let me tell you here that by you I will never be won!"

Ruby started off determined and prepared—determined to reach the friends she knew she had, and prepared for an emergency with a revolver which had long been her individual property.

"When I am missed I will be hunted," she said. "Heaven put off that hour as long as possible."

An hour after Ruby's flight from the mountain cave, she found herself a long distance from the spot, and among mountains which even in the starlight bore familiar shapes.

She pushed on as fast as she could under the circumstances, for the trail was rough, and many times she stopped to listen, as if the fear of pursuit harassed her continually.

Was Ruby going back to Dynamite as though she expected to find friends among the blackened ruins of the famous camp?

"Ho! ho! you're right, Arizony! Let me get my fingers on any one of your four parties you've mentioned an' I'll show you some tall squirmen! I'm winged, but I'm far from bein' harmless!"

"Which one would you sooner find first, cap'n?"

"Champion Dick, mebbe; but I don't know that I'd turn my hand for first choice. Oh, they'll rue the hour they begun the battle ov life!"

These words sounded suddenly on the very trail Ruby was traversing, and seemingly from a spot not twenty feet ahead.

She stopped and drew back, as if a rattlesnake had sounded his warning at her feet.

In another moment the speaker would be upon her.

"Great heavens! have I rushed from one danger into the presence of another?" she ejaculated. "What unlucky fate has thrown me into Rough Rob's path? And he is backed by the pards of Dynamite at that!"

Realizing her danger in an instant, the mountain beauty hugged the darkened wall at her left.

Her garments harmonized well with the stones, and she held her breath as the men came forward.

Her life seemed to hang by a slender thread.

"Merciful Father, preserve me from the clutches of these men!" she mentally exclaimed. "They are not the friends I seek. Into the hands of Rough Rob may I never fall again!"

The following moment she saw the stalwart figure of the Regulator of the Rockies, at the head of more men than she could count at the first glance.

What if they should see her?

The trail was not wide, and the men were likely to elbow her as they pressed on.

"What will you do with the girl—with Ruby, Rob?" asked one of the men.

"What I did with Danger Doll, ho! ho!—make her Queen ov Dynamite—the new one, ov course!" rung out the boisterous answer.

Ruby could not suppress a wild cry. It bubbled to her lips without effort.

Rough Rob halted in a second.

"Jerusalem! who hev we hyer?" he exclaimed, bounding toward the girl who had given herself away.

"The one you will never make Queen of the new Dynamite!" cried Ruby, springing out from the wall and raising the revolver as she landed in the middle of the trail.

"Ruby Rose herself!" parted the lips of twenty roughs.

"Hang me ef it isn't!" and the left arm of the Regulator went upward as he threw himself forward.

He was too quick for the fugitive girl, for, before she could cover him, the revolver had been knocked from her hand, and she found herself clutched by Rough Rob and surrounded by the men who backed him.

"Not Queen ov Dynamite, number two, eh?" he exclaimed. "We will see, my rose ov the Rockies! I always win when I play—always!"

CHAPTER XV.

GREEK AND GREEK.

"WAL, what success?"

"None ter speak ov."

"Try ag'in."

"I'm goin' ter."

It was five days after Ruby's capture by the Regulator and his pards, and the speakers were no less important individuals than the twin brothers of Blue Blazes.

One lay on a number of blankets, and the other stood over him, with brotherly solicitude and disappointment strangely commingled in his eyes.

Above both was the dark, gray ceiling of a cavern, and the light that revealed it emanated from a torch burning near the recumbent man.

"I've run Danger Doll an' thet boy prophet down, but they don't know any more about Ruby than I do," continued Champion Dick, who was the one standing erect.

Dan's eyes flashed at mention of the boy.

"You found thet young demon, you say, Dick?" he asked.

"Yes."

"An' forgot that he shot me?"

"No; I didn't forget thet he gave you a bullet," was the quick reply. "I hoped he an' his female pard would guide me to the girl. I thought ov you all ther time, Dan; but they gave me the slip. The next time I'll settle with him, for I'm confident now that they're huntin' Ruby, like myself. I'm goin' ter try it ag'in."

"Now?"

"Right off."

Champion Dick stooped and took the hand that his brother raised with an effort.

"Mebbe the boys'll git hyer afore I come back," Dick went on in a hopeful strain. "If anybody else comes you'll not be a baby, Dan," and he glanced at the two revolvers that lay at the edge of the blankets.

The eyes of Champion Dan followed the form of his stalwart brother until it disappeared, and the sound of his footsteps had died away.

"Suthin's got ter come this time, or break," said Dick, in audible tones to himself, as he stepped into the soft evening light beyond the cavern. "Monte Maud an' Parson Paul don't know where Ruby is, that's sartain. Then she is with one ov two other persons—Rough Rob or Idaho Will."

He disappeared from the trail for a minute and came out upon it again, mounted on the horse which, besides his brother, was the truest friend and ally he ever had possessed.

Champion Dick sought the trail once more.

There was something grand in his hunt for the child of that sister who had died years and years ago, friendless and penniless, in Sacramento; for the babe stolen from her breast by a woman who, with the little one, had disappeared as effectually as if the earth had opened and swallowed her.

He was confident that in the person of Danger Doll he had found Monte Maud, the child-stealer, but the girl had also disappeared, and when the brothers found themselves near the end of their Idaho trail, they were suddenly disappointed.

If Parson Paul had not rescued Danger Doll from the two Champions, Ruby's hiding-place might have been revealed, for it is not probable that the enchantress would have suffered death by hanging before divulging her secret.

This event had prolonged the hunt, it had stretched Dan on the blankets with a severe wound, and had thrown Ruby into the clutches of Rough Rob.

The lone trailer, as he went down the mountain, saw the day wane about him.

His steed's head was turned toward Dynamite, but it was miles away, and he knew that where the shanties had stood was now only a heap of ruins.

"Wouldn't I like ter meet Idaho or Rough Rob?" he suddenly ejaculated. "I wouldn't turn my hand over for the choice ov individuals. Oh! I've got ter settle with the boss of Dynamite one ov these days an' I don't keer how soon it comes. Hark!"

Champion Dick drew rein at his own warning and leaned forward.

"Which one ov 'em's comin', Bluestreak?" he said in low tones to his horse, and then turned aside into a little brake at his right and waited.

Night had not quite come.

The man from Blue Blazes could still see objects with distinctness, and he could also hear the hoof-beats of the horse which was coming from the direction toward which he had been riding.

He held at his right side while he waited a cocked revolver of the most formidable pattern, and there was eagerness in his eye.

Nearer and nearer came the horse.

Suddenly it came in sight and in an instant the eyes of Champion Dick fell upon the rider.

"Jerusalem!" he murmured. "Think ov the devil, an' he'll show up in state."

The horse which was moving in a walk like an animal somewhat fatigued had reached a spot almost opposite that occupied by Dick.

He saw the rider plainly, saw too that a lariat bound his legs to the animal's sides and that in addition to this his hands were bound to his back.

It was a singular predicament for the man to be in.

"Ho!" exclaimed Dick, sharply, and the horse stopped instantly. "What kind ov a trap caught you, Rough Robert?"

The Champion asked the question as he urged his horse into the trail, and drew rein beside the man addressed.

The bound man gave a quick start and uttered a cry of astonishment.

It was Rough Rob, the Regulator, sure enough.

And bound to his saddle!

"They turned ag'in' me, the infernal galoots!" he hissed, his eyes flashing fire, not at Dick, but over the recollection of the treatment he had lately received.

"Not the Dynamiters?" cried the Champion.

"Yes."

"What for?"

"Fer thet girl's pretty face!" was the growling answer. "The man I've always trusted, Arizony Alf, got smitten, or suthin' ov thet sort. He set up a lyin' job on me—told the pards he saw me set fire ter Dynamite, an' three other skunks swore me inter this fix."

"I would hev shot yer out ov it if I hed been thar," laughed Champion Dick, glancing at the desperado's bonds. "Whar's Ruby now?"

"Whar Arizony is."

"When did this happen?"

"Yesterday at dusk."

"All this time without feed?" exclaimed Dick.

"Who'd feed me?" grated Rough Rob. "Thar's no ravens round hyer ter look arter this mountain chick. They thought they war sendin' me inter the clutches ov some enemy when they tied me an' give this hoss a cut."

"Wal, hev'n't they, cap'n?"

Champion Dick leaned forward almost into the Regulator's face as he spoke.

"I expect they hev," was the reply. "Thar's war ter the knife twixt Dynamite an' Blue Blazes."

"Yes, an' they left you yours, I see."

Rough Rob glanced at the bowie sticking in his belt, a weapon which had been useless during his ride.

He saw the glance of his enemy fall upon it, too.

"I'll just put you on an equality with me," continued the man from the south, and the next moment he leaned toward the Regulator with a bowie in his clutch.

Rough Rob waited resolutely for the blow which he knew would come.

All at once Champion Dick's blade darted at the bonds that held the ruffian's hands in thrall and a second later they were free!

"Yer leg cords, too, eh? Wal, hyer we ar, cap'n!" and the Champion straightened in his saddle and looked at his work.

The bully of Dynamite looked astonished although he expected freedom from Dick's words.

"What ar' ye lookin' at?" suddenly laughed the Champion. "I've put ye on an equality with

me, Rough Robert, ov Dynamite. Thar's a knife in yer belt, an' ye've just remarked thet it's war ter the blade twixt the two camps. Draw an' defend yerself!"

The Regulator saw that the man who faced him meant desperate business.

He had but a moment in which to decide what he would do.

"To the knife be it, then!" he flung into his enemy's teeth as his hand darted at his bowie which he whipped out with a movement of eagerness and revenge. "Let this fight twixt Dynamite an' Blue Blazes be to the death, Champion—which ov the twin pard is it?"

"Dick!" was the response. "Dick, the man thet dropped yer arm at yer side t'other night!"

An oath of madness shot over Rough Rob's lips, and he sprung erect in the stirrups with the flashing bowie in his left hand.

Champion Dick leaped eagerly to the combat, and the next moment in that lonely mountain pass and among the shades of evening, the two Champions of the rival camps were fighting like gladiators!

CHAPTER XVI.

LASSOED AND SHOT.

TEN minutes later one man rode away, leaving behind him on the battle-ground a horse at whose front feet lay a human body.

"One point for Blue Blazes ef it is in ashes," said this individual glancing back over his shoulder at the foe left behind. "Never more will the hand thet nailed the insult to the door ov the Cold Deck Hotel lift a bowie ag'in' the silver camp!"

The speaker, Champion Dick, rode on, watched though he knew it not by a youth who had appeared on the trail at a point not far from the bowie duel.

"If I was certain about his identity I'd catch up with him," the boyish watcher said to himself. "He looks like one of the men from Blue Blazes. He—there! he has halted. Has he heard me?"

Champion Dick had suddenly drawn rein, the youth saw him come toward him, back toward the dueling ground.

"Now I'll see who he is," continued the Champion's trailer. "Ah! it is one of the big brothers!"

The following moment Champion Dick was startled by a voice at his right, and he saw a figure spring nimbly forward.

"Idaho Will!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, and you are—"

"Blue Blazes Dick."

"Thank heaven! then I have not found a foe."

"Wal, I should reckon not, boy," laughed the man on horseback. "Not an hour ago I war wishin' I might strike one ov two persons an' by Jerusalem! I've found 'em both. You ar' one ov 'em, Idaho; the other you must hev seen back on this trail."

"No."

"Wal, he's thar just the same."

"Rough Rob?" cried Idaho Will.

"Thet's what they called 'im."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, an' tied to his horse."

"Then he was the man who dashed past me last night," said the boy. "I saw him but for a moment, but long enough to see that he was tied to the saddle. I could not follow, for I was afoot. My horse was too lame to carry me when I left Camp Dynamite for the last time. So you met Rough Rob?"

"Yes, an' left him whar we parted," said Dick a glitter of triumph giving spirit to his eyes. "He handled a bowie like a saint, Idaho; but what could he do ag'in' a galoot who fought ter vindicate the honor ov Blue Blazes?"

"Nothing, I should think."

"Ov course nothin'. Now, Idaho, whar's Ruby?"

The boy started.

"Would to heaven I knew!" he exclaimed.

"Where was she the last you heard of her?"

"In the hands of Arizona Alf an' the pard ov Dynamite."

"Not there!—not in their clutches!" cried Idaho Will, shuddering.

"Thet's what Rough Rob said: they took her from him."

This revelation seemed to force the youth into silence.

Ruby Rose the prisoner of such a man as Arizona Alf?

He knew the ruffian well, knew him for a man more fiendish than Rough Rob.

He did not speak until Champion Dick's finger alighted on his shoulder.

"Don't let my information knock yer dumb!" said the stalwart Champion. "Pick up courage an' look misfortune squar'ly in the eye. I've looked her out ov countenance a thousand times. Ef Ruby war in perdition, I'd get to the end ov my trail just the same."

"And I'd reach it with you!" exclaimed the boy. "Together we'll follow it to the end. Let the men of Dynamite look out! The prize they snatched from Rough Rob they shall not keep!"

"Bet yer boots on thet, Idaho!"

"But I want a horse."

"Take the one I left whar Cap'n Rob lies."

"Is it far down yonder?"

"Not over half a mile."

"Wait for me here, then," and the youth bounded away before Champion Dick could reply.

The man from Blue Blazes had hit the distance, for it was exactly half a mile to the spot where he left Rough Rob at his horse's feet, cut to the heart with the bowie that fought for the honor of the silver camp.

As Idaho Will was active and nimble, youth favoring him in this respect, he was not long in reaching his destination.

Night had fallen over the mountains, but the unclouded canopy of heaven was sown with stars, whose brilliant light rendered objects very distinct.

He first caught sight of the outlines of the horse, and then saw the human figure that lay across the trail.

"Champion Dick fetched his man, sure enough," he said, going forward. "The trails of this man, who persecuted me in Camp Dynamite, have reached an end. Hello! Dick's left something pinned to his bosom. I wonder what it is."

The boy stooped and took hold of the piece of paper that was fastened to the blood-stained shirt-front of the mountain desperado, and tried to read its inscription by the light of the stars.

"I haven't got light enough," he said, desisting and feeling for a match. "I'm going to know what Blue Blazes left on Dynamite's breast. A warning, I expect."

The next moment he struck a match and bent eagerly over the paper while its light burst into a flame.

What did he read?

This:

"This man *was* once my friend, and I will avenge him! I hate two persons more than all others—Champion Dick, and the baby of Dynamite, Idaho Will!"

The boy read the sentences with his eyes, all but the last word, his name.

That he spoke aloud as he leaped to his feet.

"Only one person in the world could have written that," he cried. "It wasn't necessary for you to sign your name to the paper, Danger Doll. You have been here since Champion Dick went away. You cannot be far off now."

"Well, I should say not, my young viper!"

In a second Idaho Will had whirled upon the person over whose lips these words were hissed.

His hand flew instantly to the revolver that filled one of the pockets of his belt, but the click of a pistol-lock, and the same voice, checked him.

"Draw that weapon and lose your brains!" fell on his ear. "I didn't expect to meet you so soon, but the meeting is welcome to me just the same. I don't ask where you came from, for I don't care. Come forward, parson, and lasso this young wildcat. Ah! Idaho, do you recognize my friend here?"

Idaho Will who turned half-way around at the sound of a footstep found himself face to face with a youth of his own size.

A lasso dangled from his hand, and he was recognized the moment he threw the noose over his head for a cast.

"Parson Paul! what a fool I was for saving him from the clutches of the vixen who is now in league with him," he said to himself; then he looked at Danger Doll.

"You dare not let that boy and me fight on an equal footing," he cried.

"He'd sooner lasso you," laughed the mountain Jezebel. "Ask him if he wouldn't."

"A thousand times sooner!" flashed Parson Paul.

"Coward!" grated Idaho Will.

The well deserved epithet had hardly ceased to sound ere the lasso spun suddenly through the air, and in the flash of an eyelash, as it were, it dropped upon the young Dynamiter's shoulders!

In another instant he was jerked almost off his feet, and the terrible coil, tightening at the same moment about his neck, nearly deprived him of consciousness.

"That arm of rock above you will make an excellent beam," he heard Danger Doll say. "Ah! we'll leave Idaho Will, the young viper, to keep Rough Rob company!"

He saw Parson Paul come forward and heard a loud report.

Danger Doll turned with a cry of alarm, and the boy prophet tumbled against his victim—dead!

CHAPTER XVII.

BLUE BLAZES WINS.

OUT of the smoke that rose above the revolver which had finished the career of the boy prophet of the land of gold, there advanced a man, at sight of whom the enchantress recoiled with a cry of amazement.

"Champion Dick!" the man said looking at her. "Thet's who I am, serpent. Stand where you ar', or by Heaven! I'll let you keep the boy company whar he lies."

She was on the point of breaking away when the stern voice and the leveled revolver arrested her.

The Champion of Blue Blazes did not stop until he had reached a spot within arm's reach of her.

"I don't think you know whar Ruby is, tharfore, I'll not ask you," he went on.

"I don't know."

"If you knew you wouldn't tell me, eh, Monte Maud?"

The woman did not speak, but her black eyes said: "I would not."

"By George!" suddenly cried Champion Dick. "I can't kill a woman, though I'd swear you deserve a dozen deaths. You won't deny to me now that you stole my sister's child from her while she lay dyin' in Sacramento?"

"I did it, Champion Dick," said the woman promptly, but with no show of penitence.

"You carried her off an' changed your name from Monte Maud to Danger Doll?"

"Yes."

"An' you would have kept Ruby forever from Dan an' I ef you could?"

"Why not? She grew up too beautiful to give up."

"Like her mother! Now, about face! Your sex saves you. After you shot Dan I swore to get even with you, an' I will; but I will never shed a drop of your blood. How will I do it? Wherever you go, you will be branded a child-stealer; men an' women shall hate you till you die. I wouldn't give a bullet for your chances ef Dan had the drop on you. About face, an' move on!"

The parting look that the mountain Jezebel shot at the stalwart tough was full of unquenchable hate, her eyes seemed to burst into flame, she clinched her hands till the palms bled.

"Follow me to the new fields of operations and I will more than show my teeth!" she sent back fiercely at the Champion. "Interfere in my affairs, and I will make you wish, Champion Dick, that the sun had never gladdened your eyes. You spare a fiend when you grant me mercy."

Champion Dick leaped toward the speaker but checked himself suddenly and laughed:

"She's showin' her teeth now, the tigress is, that's all!" and he let her move off unharmed.

A few moments later he turned toward Idaho Will who had removed the almost fatal noose from his throat and stood ready to thank him for his timely interference.

Champion Dick had reached the spot in the nick of time.

"I thought you stayed longer than was necessary," he said in an explanatory manner to the youth. "An' so I thought I'd see what war up."

"Hello! I smell burnt powder!" rung out a voice behind the Champion and he whirled instantly with cocked pistol. "Draw yer drop-pers, pard; thar's no tellin' who's in the neighborhood."

Idaho Will's hand dropped on the mountain trailer's arm.

"And get your revolver ready, too," he whispered. "I'd know that voice among a thousand. It belongs to Arizona Alf."

Champion Dick had already turned toward the direction from which the voice had come.

"The very hound I want to meet!" he exclaimed.

He did not have to wait more than a minute

ere there appeared in view the figures of a number of men, headed by a broad-shouldered fellow at whose side walked a young girl.

"Ruby!" ejaculated Idaho Will, seeing not the giant, but his companion.

"Halt!" cried Champion Dick till that moment unseen by the roughs who halted at sound of his voice, and recoiled a foot with their bronzed hands at the butts of their revolvers.

"Gentlemen tigers ov Dynamite, I'll take the lamb in yer midst," continued Champion Dick with aggravating coolness behind the heavy six-shooters which he had thrust into the ruffians' faces. "The man who attempts to keep her whar she is, gets cold lead in his brain. Come hyer, Ruby!"

Without a moment's hesitation the beautiful girl whose face had flushed with joy at the first word started toward the Champion, but a hand shot after her and closed upon her arm.

"Don't you know better than that, Arizony?" exclaimed Dick, and the right hand revolver spoke the doom of the man who had lately robbed the big Regulator of his fair captive!

The death of Arizona Alf released the girl, and with a bound or two she made herself secure under the leveled pistols of the man from Blue Blazes.

"About face an' make yerselves scarce!" cried Champion Dick to the bewildered toughs upon whom the sudden death of their leader had fallen with the force of a thunderbolt.

"Pour into 'em before they go!" rung out a loud voice from behind Champion Dick. "Thar kin be no peace with Dynamite while one ov the galoots lives. Thar they ar' boyees! Death to ther varmint ov silverdom!"

The answer was a number of exasperated cries and a succession of shots.

The roughs of the Rockies fell in every direction, or took to their heels and tried to get beyond range.

"We hev'n't forgotten thet Blue Blazes war burnt by a Dynamite match!" cried the man who halted before Champion Dick with a smoking weapon in his hand. "We've been on the trail ov thet bad lot ever since sundown, an' revenge hez given us night eyes. Not while one ov 'em lives shall we put one log on another whar Blue Blazes once stood. It's war ter the knife, Dick, an' the bowie to the hilt!"

The speaker was Roaring Rube, one of the best men of the burnt camp, and he left the Champion to pursue the roughs who had got away.

"At last!" cried Dick, as he turned to Ruby and took her up in his strong arms. "I'm not goin' ter say another word till I kin lay you in ther arms ov the best man in Idaho. Come, Idaho Will. By Jehosaphat! This hour is worth fightin' for. An' ef Dynamite an' Blue Blazes hadn't quarreled, it might never hev got hyer."

An hour later Champion Dick looked. "I've got 'er," said Dick with a triumphant expression.

The wounded pard almost sprung from his cot.

"Got who?" he shouted.

"Ruby."

Up went the arms of Champion Dick, and Ruby suddenly found her face pressed close to the bronzed cheeks of the mountain giant.

"After sixteen years! Thank Heaven!" ejaculated the wounded brother. "Now let all the men-tigers ov Idaho try ter take Ruby from us, eh, Dick?"

Champion Dick's eyes glowed like two coals of fire, and he shouted aloud as his fine figure straightened:

"Yes, let all the fiends from perdition try it, an' fail!"

It was never tried.

Notwithstanding the incidents of our mountain romance occurred a few months ago, a new Blue Blazes has already risen out of the ruins of the old one, and the men who fought for and avenged the destruction of the one are ready to perform a like service for the other.

Dynamite never rose from its ashes, for the few roughs who escaped the revolvers of the pards of Blue Blazes were hunted from the country, and found life more congenial elsewhere.

As for Danger Doll, or Monte Maud, a recent paper from the great West informs me that a certain faro queen answering her description, was recently caught and publicly whipped in a mountain camp for a case of child-stealing in which she participated in Sacramento city nearly seventeen years ago.

The vengeance of the twin brothers still pursues her, and from camp to camp, always in ad-

vance of her, flies the story of her infamous crime—a crime which the big bronzed men of the silver range detest.

Blue Blazes is in a prosperous condition, for Rough Rob nails no more insults to the door of the Cold Deck Hotel, and its citizens are not required to hunt from trail to trail the slanderers of their honor.

Parson Paul, the boy prophet, who invaded Idaho for the sole purpose of finding Ruby, of whom he had heard somewhere, possessed no key to a gold mine.

The much-talked-of vein of auriferous ore was a myth—a mere story invented to tempt Danger Doll into an alliance, and with pretty good success, too.

Unless all signs fail, there will be a wedding at Blue Blazes before the snows are very deep, and the bride is to be presented with the handsomest home among the silver hills.

I need not name the parties to be made happy for life by the ceremony, when I have said that the pretty bride is to be given away by the twin pards of Blue Blazes—Champion Dick and Champion Dan.

THE END.

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